

# **ACADEMIC RESILIENCE OF CHILDREN WHO OVERCOME ADVERSITY**

by

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November 2022

## DECLARATION

I, Dane Paul Channon, 2015275684, hereby declare that the dissertation titled *Academic resilience of children who overcome adversity* is my own work and has not previously been submitted for assessment or completion of any postgraduate qualification to another university or another qualification.

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## DECLARATION BY SUPERVISOR

I, Anet Elizabeth Louw, hereby declare that the dissertation *Academic resilience of children who overcome adversity* is the work of Dane Paul Channon towards the degree Doctor of Psychology (with specialisation in Child Psychology) and that it has not previously been submitted for assessment or completion of any postgraduate qualification to another university or another qualification.

Prof. A. E. Louw

November 2022

## PROOF OF LANGUAGE EDITING

I, Dane Channon, confirm that as a proficient first-language English speaker, I have conducted an English proofreading and grammar edit on the dissertation *Academic resilience of children who overcome adversity*. Furthermore, Grammarly was used as a control mechanism, while two promoters who are textbook writers also assisted in the editing process. A professional librarian (Ms H. Van Tonder) also conducted an APA (7<sup>th</sup> ed.) edit on the dissertation.

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## ABSTRACT

Children in South Africa walk a fragile path to adulthood. This sentiment by UNICEF in 2012 remains relevant for children in the country a decade later. Youth face a myriad of threats to development. Despite many children succumbing to such risks, some children bounce back from adversities to foster resilient outcomes.

This qualitative, multiple case study research aimed to explore how children navigate, negotiate, and engage with their social ecologies to overcome adversity and demonstrate academic resilience. Four adolescent participants were purposefully selected from East London schools in the Eastern Cape. These learners were identified by their school ecologies as having achieved positive academic outcomes despite experiences of significant adversity. The social ecology of resilience framework (SERT) was used to conceptualise the study. Multiple data collection sources were used, contributing to the descriptive and explanatory analyses of the data. Five phases of analytical data analysis aligned with case study research were employed to uncover contextually relevant themes of resilience building. The case studies yielded rich and detailed information on the biological vulnerabilities, challenging social and physical environments, specific negative life events and compound socio-demographic risks experienced by these children, the personal, relational, structural, and spiritual/cultural resilience enablers in their ecologies, and the processes by which these children identified and used these enablers across their social ecologies.

This study contributed to theory building for SERT as a framework for understanding how children transact resources and opportunities within their social

ecologies in culturally and contextually meaningful ways. The strengths, implications and limitations of the study are indicated, and recommendations are offered.

*Key words:* academic resilience; adolescents; adversity; qualitative multiple case study social ecology of resilience framework (SERT).

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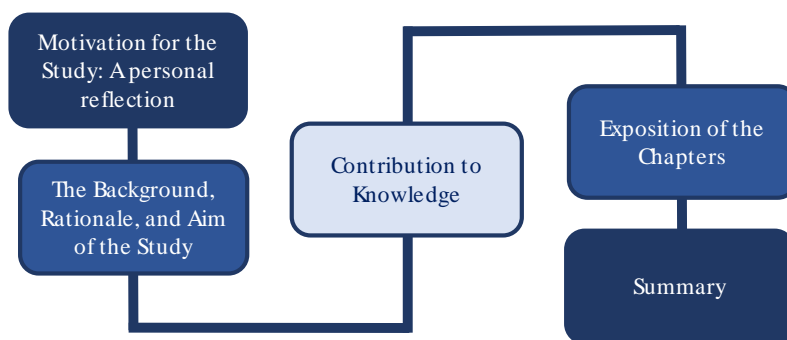
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

*Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.*

- *Helen Keller*



#### 1.1 Motivation for the Study: A personal reflection

Resilience has been an interest of mine for many years. I have worked in school-based support teams (SBSTs) for the better part of eight years. During this time, I have witnessed the resilient processes of those children whose lives seemed so overwhelmed by adversity that it appeared mystical that these children found a way to achieve academically against such odds. Ann Masten's (2001, p. 7) description of resilience as "ordinary magic" is perhaps the most appropriate conceptualisation of this resilience phenomenon. This term is, of course, an oxymoron. How can the magic be ordinary? This conundrum is a guiding question for my motivation to undertake this research.

Like many people, I have had my share of adversity. I was raised in a house of chaos associated with the continuous conflict between an abusive, alcoholic father and a mother struggling with a mood disorder. I had felt the burns of cigarettes extinguished on my arms when my behaviour as a six-year-old, undiagnosed child

with attention deficit hyperactive disorder was impartial to my father. I have experienced the symphony of shattered dinner plates against a kitchen wall and the splintered glass of my father punching through a window after being locked out of the house after one of his binges. I have missed school to hide bruises, dusted the remains of drugs from a coffee table and prevented my mother's suicide. I have lived in a garage, worked two jobs to get myself through school and university, and nursed my mother through cancer – a battle she ultimately lost. Nevertheless, despite this, I, too, somehow managed to overcome these challenges to write this doctoral thesis.

I have never presumed myself to be superhuman. I had hardly considered or reflected on the processes that fostered such resilience. Thus, this research is not only a contribution to the South African body of research in resilience but also a journey of self-discovery. I want to understand better how some children come to conquer adversity and achieve academic success because I know first-hand how academic success opens doors to opportunities.

In this chapter, I will provide a brief background, rationale, and aim of the study, as well as the contribution of this study to the body of knowledge on children's resilience. I also include an exposition of the various chapters.

## **1.2 The Background, Rationale, and Aim of the Study**

It is in the interest of every society for children to reach their fullest potential to become worthy social, emotional, and economic contributors to their communities as adults. Unfortunately, many children worldwide are exposed to various factors that may hamper their developmental outcomes. It has been estimated that 50% of the world's children are currently suffering significant deprivation that effectively denies them an optimal childhood. These deprivations can occur in all human psychological and biological dimensions (Amnesty International, 2021; United Nations Programme

on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), 2020). South Africa is no exception to this phenomenon (Stats SA, 2020, 2021). As early as 1986, Percy Qoboza (1986), a South African journalist, stated that "If it is true that a people's wealth is in its children, then South Africa is bitterly, tragically poor. If it is true that a nation's future is in its children, we have no future and deserve none" (p. E2).

Although South Africa has identified the main areas of children's suffering and has set goals in this regard, we unfortunately still have a long way to go. The circumstances in which our children grow up (crime, violence, various forms of abuse, lack of social assistance, and poor education) are still of national and international concern (Louw & Louw, 2022). In fact, in 2012, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) declared, "To be a child in South Africa is to walk a fragile path to adulthood" (p. 5). In their article *We are killing our children, we are killing our future*, Jacobs and Nadat (2021) stated that South Africa remains an extraordinarily violent and traumatised society and that violence and abuse of children are systemic. It is equally tragic that political and other leaders do not realise that if our children's exposure to adversities could be decreased, it would benefit society as a whole. In this vein, Nelson Mandela's quote from one of his addresses (1995) comes to mind "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."

The above exposition refers to the various risk factors that children are exposed to that could compromise their development and well-being and contribute to their vulnerability to social, physical, and mental health issues. These risk factors include challenging social and physical environments (e.g., community violence, gangsterism, ineffective schools and education, poor parenting practices), specific negative life events (e.g., the death of a parent, parental divorce, abuse, neglect,

abandonment, bullying, substance abuse, endemics, epidemics, and pandemics), compound socio-demographic risks (e.g., poverty, prejudice), as well as biological vulnerabilities (e.g., genetic predispositions, various disabilities and illnesses) (Van Rensburg et al., 2015).

Although many youths succumb to these risks, many others develop normatively or even flourish in the face of adversity. Researchers in this field investigate how individuals navigate these adversities and establish themselves favourably in their various environments. This capacity to do well despite adverse conditions is broadly termed 'resilience', while the processes and resources that enable resilient outcomes are referred to as 'enablers of resilience' (Haffejee, 2018; Van Breda & Theron, 2018). Resilience research has been plagued by variable definitions and operationalisations over the years (Van Rensburg et al., 2015). What has emerged, though, is that resilience is a complex field that has evolved over the decades. For example, resilience studies changed from initial person-focused models to acknowledging that the developing individual is both complex and dynamic – changes occur continuously due to the numerous interactions of people and their environments, as well as ongoing interactions within the individual (Masten & Barnes, 2018). Resilience is currently seen as a culturally aligned transaction and is regarded as a reciprocal process between individuals and their social ecologies, as explicated in Ungar's (2012) social ecology resilience theory.

In their review of South African child and youth quantitative resilience studies during the period 1996-2012, Van Rensburg et al. (2015) found that South African research on resilience reflected the use of outdated and undeclared theoretical frameworks informing conceptualisation and operationalisation; most of the studies explained resilience as a too simplistic process; invalid Western scales were used,

and a lack of direct measures of risks was evident. In addition, the studies did not replicate the international progress in conceptualising resilience as a transactional process. In a subsequent review of resilience studies between 2009 and 2017, which included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method designs, Van Breda and Theron (2018) identified four categories of social ecological enablers: personal, relational, structural, and spiritual/cultural. Most of the resilience enablers identified in these studies were personal and relational. Of the 61 studies reviewed, only four explicitly associated resilience with children and young people's ability to interact with or utilise resources in their social environments. Therefore, this aspect is still relatively uncharted and needs to be addressed, especially since various developmental psychologists have acknowledged the reciprocal process between children and their environments.

From the perusal of the extant literature, it has become clear that the educational context is one of the most salient and vital ecologies in children's lives (Masten, 2014). However, it seems that academic resilience is one domain of resilience that has been significantly neglected. This paucity in the field is critical since education remains crucial for many countries, such as South Africa, where school failure rates reinforce societal inequalities (Hart et al., 2016). According to Taylor and Yu (2009), South Africa presents a fascinating context for studying academic resilience because, compared to other countries, it exhibits one of the strongest correlations between learners' socio-economic status and academic performance.

Although it cannot be denied that poverty has a far-reaching effect on children's academic resilience, it is essential to acknowledge that other risk factors (e.g., various adverse life events) may also hamper their ability to thrive at school. It is, therefore, equally important to investigate how children negotiate these risk factors to

achieve positive academic outcomes. This exploration will enable researchers and policymakers to understand better the processes and transactions involved in fostering academic resilience. Conversely, if children are to thrive, society's prerogative is to ensure that they are provided with adequate resources in their social ecologies, which they can navigate and negotiate to help them through their scholastic careers.

A perusal of the literature to date revealed that most studies on academic resilience in South Africa focused on structural risk factors (e.g., poverty and low-quality education) in township schools (Mampane, 2014; Mampane & Boucher, 2011; Wills & Hofmeyr, 2018). Thus, there remains a gap in the literature for academic resilience among Model C school environments (former whites-only schools) where children's social ecologies are likely to hold more resources for at-risk children. It should be acknowledged that many children in South Africa are hampered by various adversities that could affect their academic outcomes despite their socio-economic backgrounds and the quality of their social ecologies. Therefore, it is essential to explore all children's adversities and resilience processes – especially how they perceive and transact with their social ecologies to enhance their academic performance.

Therefore, the study aims to investigate how at-risk children from various backgrounds transact with their various ecologies to develop academic resilience. Due to the in-depth nature of this enquiry and based on the literature, a qualitative multiple-case study methodology emerged as the most applicable research design (Meriam, 2009; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). This study is conceptualised within the Social Ecology Resilience Theory (SERT) (Ungar, 2012) and within the overarching philosophical epistemology of constructivist realism.

### **1.3 Contribution to Knowledge**

This study aims to contribute to the resilience research literature in the local South African context. As Van Rensburg and colleagues (2015) discussed, much of this South African research leaves gaps that potentially undermine the credibility and relevance of resilience studies in the local context. Using an established social ecology theoretical framework (SERT), this study grounds itself in a contextually relevant and contemporary way that speaks to the unique processes of academically resilient South African children.

Additionally, a multiple-case study design is rarely used in psychology resilience studies despite the demonstrable value such an approach holds (Sriskandarajay et al., 2010; Theron & Theron, 2014). Furthermore, the potential to build onto existing social ecology theory is a strength of this study due to the theoretical propositions that guide the research (see Yin, 2018). As of yet, there is no case study research exploring the resilience-building process of academically resilient children in South Africa (EBSCOhost).

Finally, the study aims to build onto contemporary research for the social ecological resilience theory through an analytic strategy that can serve credence for the propositions underpinning the study.

A note to the reader: key terms and concepts will be defined in the thesis.

### **1.4 Exposition of the Chapters**

Chapter 1 introduces the study's background, rationale, aim, and contribution. Chapter 2 contextualises the study within the field of resilience. Moreover, the phenomena of adversity and enablers of resilience are unpacked through the lens of

the social ecology of resilience theory (SERT) in how children foster academic resilience despite significant adversity. Subsequently, Chapter 3 outlines the multiple-case study research design used for the current research and the philosophical orientation of constructive realism underpinning the research methods used to answer the research questions. After that, the ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the study are highlighted. Chapter 4 describes the data gathered from multiple sources according to an analytic descriptive narrative strategy in which data is matched to the theoretical propositions of the study. Chapter 5 uses an explanation-building analytic strategy to explain the data through the social ecology of resilience framework in alignment with the theoretical propositions of the study.

Moreover, the cross-case synthesis adds additional depth to the analysis for theory-building, which became an additional aim as the analysis unfolded. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes by unpacking the contextually relevant findings from chapters 4 and 5 to answer the research questions of how academically resilient children utilise resources and supports in their social ecologies to overcome adversity. Emergent themes are presented that speak to the study's guiding theoretical principles, and the research's strengths and limitations are highlighted. The chapter concludes with the researcher's reflexivity.

## **1.5 Summary**

In this chapter, the reader is introduced to the academic resilience of children who overcome adversity. The motivation for the study is presented, followed by a brief overview of the background, rationale and aim to orientate the reader. The research design and methodology, as well as the theoretical and epistemology frameworks, are briefly mentioned. These topics will be discussed, and the concepts will be

defined in more detail in the subsequent chapters. The next chapter comprises a discussion of literature relevant to the study.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE



#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter contextualises this study by unpacking the historical overview of the emergence and subsequent study of resilience as a distinct field within psychology. The origins of resilience and the critical research contributors will be discussed before addressing the very construct of resilience and how it is defined across various contexts with a specific focus on psychology. After that, the four waves and the emerging fifth wave delineate resilience research development over time, followed by an overview of South African resilience studies. Additionally, the specific domain of academic resilience will be addressed. Lastly, the Social Ecology Theory of resilience will be presented as the conceptual framework of the current study.

#### 2.2 Origins of Resilience

Adversities such as wars, various forms of violence, natural and manmade disasters, epidemics and pandemics, socio-political inequalities and displacements, socio-economic challenges, and various personal setbacks and challenges have beleaguered human beings throughout the ages. These events often change the course of history and influence the existence of communities and the developmental

trajectories of individuals. Despite hardships experienced, history abounds with individuals who triumphed over adversity, obstacles, and difficult odds to attain significant achievement.

Positive outcomes in the face of adversity paved the way for theorists and researchers to seek answers to how some people respond adaptively despite significant odds whilst others succumb to adverse outcomes due to their unfavourable circumstances. Interestingly, early research in this regard has its roots in research and literature during and after the Second World War.

Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's (1943) literature on the adverse effects of war on child development began in 1936 when children in Spain were subjected to bombardments and continued throughout World War II. Their work detailed the abnormal developmental behaviours of children affected by the war and profoundly impacted subsequent child development literature, attachment, and adoption science.

The consequences of childhood exposure to significant risk and the resulting adverse outcomes gained significance and gave rise to efforts to mitigate abnormal development in children. The profound impact of separation and loss on children and that children reacted with significant trauma when separated from their parents drove initiatives to protect the developmental processes of children. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) was founded in 1946 to provide relief to children in countries devastated by World War II. After 1950 the fund directed its efforts toward general programmes for improving children's welfare, particularly in less-developed countries in various emergencies.

Research in the 1940s was primarily preoccupied with the nature of disorder, in line with the symptoms-based medical 'deficit' models of illness and psychopathology

of the time (Windle, 2010). However, certain researchers became increasingly aware that studying risk was insufficient and that positive processes also needed to be considered. For example, children showed obvious shock and stress in threatening situations of the War. However, those children who remained in a caregiver's presence evinced significantly lesser reactions to the stressors (Freud et al., 1943). Thus, researchers became increasingly familiar with the protective role a proximal attachment figure plays in a child's life. The research of Norman Garmezy, Emmy Werner and Michael Rutter is widely considered to be the most salient contribution to the body of early resilience work. All three were affected by World War II (Masten et al., 1990).

Norman Garmezy was a pioneer who made various salient contributions to the conceptualisation of resilience and is often noted as the founder of resilience (Rutter, 2012). Garmezy had served in the infantry as a young soldier and had fought in the Battle of the Bulge before moving back to America to become a clinical psychologist and influential researcher. His early research was on the process-reactive dichotomy in schizophrenia that was prevalent at the time (Garmezy et al., 1961; Garmezy & Rodnick, 1959). He was particularly interested in the differences in developmental trajectories and outcomes of these two groups and the factors that explained these differences. More specifically, he noted that people with reactive schizophrenia showed premorbid competence, therefore living quite everyday lives; they showed resilient trajectories and often did not need medication to improve. However, people living with process schizophrenia were more chronically impaired throughout their lives. This difference prompted Garmezy to consider 'favourable' and 'unfavourable' prognostic indices in schizophrenia. He delineated five factors associated with

favourable versus unfavourable outcomes: clinical factors, social and personal history, abstract thinking skills, constitutional factors, and physiological factors.

Garmezy's course of focus shifted to child development, and he was the founder of Project Competence, one of the landmark longitudinal studies in the field of resilience (see Garmezy, 1970, 1971, 1975, 1987; 1981; 1991a, 1991b; Garmezy et al., 1984; Garmezy et al., 1974). The research programme focused on the manifestations of competence and incompetence in children considered to be at risk for psychopathology based on mental illness in a parent (schizophrenia, affective disorder, personality disorder) and manifest disorders, disabilities, and behaviour problems in children. Garmezy and his colleagues attempted to understand the protective and risk factors in stress-resistant children, thereby setting the course for the building blocks of developmental psychopathology. They set out to measure and operationalise both adaptive competence and risk criteria and factors that might account for variations in children's adaption in the context of such risks. Garmezy and his colleagues (1984) developed a 3-model approach to stress resistance in a multivariate regression framework: the compensatory, challenge, and protective factor models. The compensatory model is additive, where stressors lower competence and personal attributes improve adjustment. For example, children in high-risk environments may have compensatory attributes (e.g., problem-solving skills; a warm, close relationship with another person); the challenge model posits a curvilinear relationship where stressors may enhance adjustment, such as that some stress is needed to develop coping skills and to mobilise internal and external resources; the protective model postulates an interactive relationship between risk and protection factors which reduces the probability of a negative outcome and moderates the effect of risk exposure. For example, a child in high poverty may have

a cohesive home which interacts with the poverty to decrease risk. Overall, Garmezy and his co-researchers identified individual factors of children (e.g., cognitive skills, temperament, responsiveness to others), familial factors (e.g., socio-economic factors, parental competence) and support factors (the availability of external support systems) as the significant factors that modified competence. Children with greater assets appeared to be more competent, socially engaged, and less prone to disruptive-aggressive responses than those with low assets.

Garmezy's contribution to resilience research is that he regarded development as a unifying concept focusing on both continuities and discontinuities in developmental psychopathology, of which neither could be presumed to predominate. Secondly, he helped move resilience beyond theory into practice with a rigorous approach to methodological analysis incorporating quantitative and qualitative methods. Garmezy later mentored another critical figure in resilience research – Ann Masten, who continues to influence resilience literature.

Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith's landmark longitudinal study (1982, 1992, 2001) investigated at-risk Hawaiian youths' risk and protective variables. Werner had been one of the children who experienced the effects of bombing and food shortage in Europe during World War II. Werner and Smith began their longitudinal study in 1954 with a cohort of 698 infants born on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. The study aimed to detail the children's developmental outcomes (e.g., physical, social, intellectual, and behavioural) until adulthood. The youths faced risks of chronic poverty, parental alcoholism, low education, and perinatal stress. The net for resilience research was expanded to include multiple adverse conditions. Many of the children had displayed problematic behaviours by age ten. However, approximately one-third of the at-risk cohort appeared to respond positively and evinced successful life outcomes

(Werner, 1989). Werner published a second follow-up study in 1989 to explore the long-term effects of the protective factors in the cohort's lives, which contained 545 participants of the original 698. It was documented that some 75% of the resilient youths described being satisfied as adults. Moreover, some children who had initially displayed delinquent behaviours in adolescence also became successful adults.

Werner's studies illuminated two notable findings: first, children who demonstrated the highest resilience appeared to have access to (and make use of) more protective factors that buffered the risks. Secondly, resilience is multidimensional and can be fostered at later stages in life. Werner (1989) advocated for protective factors to be fostered at the individual, family, and community levels, similar to Garmezy. Moreover, she proposed that intervention supports are needed to address the risk versus the protective balance of variables over individuals' lifespan. Werner (1982) posited that most children had a 'self-righting' tendency to all but the most unrelenting adversity.

Michael Rutter is perhaps best regarded as the key figure in establishing child psychiatry as a medical and biopsychosocial speciality of study and practice (Hartman, 2003). Rutter was one of the children from Great Britain that had been evacuated and relocated to America during the blitz. Rutter's seminal studies compared the developmental outcomes of children at risk from the less privileged inner-borough London area with children from the lower-risk environment in the Isle of Wight. Rutter (1979) identified six risk variables and deduced that children exposed to more risk (four or more of the variables) had a one in five chance of developing a psychiatric disorder compared to children (one or no risk variables) having a 1% chance of psychiatric disorder. In the early 1970s, Rutter produced *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed*, considered one of the salient writings in childcare

based on Bowlby's (1951) maternal deprivation hypothesis. Rutter (1972), however, advocated that the negative consequences experienced by children were not merely a result of maternal deprivation. He posited that this was a 'vulnerability factor' as other variables existed, such as family discord and the complexity of separation distress which also played a role in developmental outcomes (Kolvin, 1999). Rutter (1974) proposed that both divested learning *and* emotional environments significantly affected psychopathology development in children in later stages of life. This inclusion broadened the knowledge base of what we consider attachment theory in psychology today.

Additionally, Rutter collaborated with Garmezy in 1983 on *Stress, Coping, and Development in Children* considered a work of signal importance to psychology and resilience. This text examined stress in children from a developmental and neurochemical perspective by investigating specific risk factors such as deprivation, death of a parent, birth of a sibling, prematurity, war, and divorce, as well as their correlation with developmental outcomes. Rutter focused on searching for positive adaptation in children who had experienced significant risk rather than his original preoccupation with psychopathology pathways. Rutter's studies on adopted Romanian orphans' recovery processes following neglect and trauma also shifted focus from risk to potential positive adaptation to significant adversity. A fundamental principle of Rutter's work advocates that resilience is an ordinary adaptation providing the necessary resources are present rather than an intrinsic psychological trait.

Furthermore, Rutter held a lifespan approach to resilience as a 'chemistry of the moment' rather than a static, permanent feature. Individual divergence speaks to the different ways in which children respond to risk. This divergence is outlined in his

statement that it is a requisite to assess individual needs regarding specific circumstances rather than to assume that all risk and protective factors have comparable effects in all contexts and all people (Rutter, 2013).

Thus, early researchers in resilience observed that the relationship between vulnerability and deleterious outcomes was not universal since not all individuals evinced an adverse response to vulnerability. Moreover, how individuals respond resiliently to significant environmental risks also varies considerably. According to Masten (2011), some individuals experience a slight decline in functioning and then recover; others evince low to no diminished functioning, while others even produce better adaptive outcomes. The focus on competence despite exposure to significant adversity has made the concept of resilience a worthy pursuit for practitioners looking to promote and foster positive outcomes in vulnerable populations (Luthar, 2000). A considerable body of research has documented the processes by which positive developmental outcomes among these vulnerable individuals and groups have been achieved (see Goldstein & Brooks, 2013; Masten, 2013, 2014; Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013; Rutter, 2012). In more recent times, the construct of resilience has been studied across broader domains of development, including families (Herdiana et al., 2017; Oh & Chang, 2014), schools (Doll, 2013; Ungar et al., 2014), communities (Turliuc et al., 2013, Walsh, 2013) and societies (Benedikter et al., 2017; Hart et al., 2016).

In answering how children can adapt to such significant threats in their lives and bounce back despite these odds, Masten and colleagues (2018) assert that people can adapt to adversity because resilience is partly due to the biological and cultural evolution of humans bestowing adaptive advantages. Moreover, they are protected

by many reserve systems primarily embedded in reciprocal transactions with others in their homes and communities.

Three core questions drove the advancement of resilience as a science (Masten et al., 2018). Fundamentally, these questions, involving identifying significant threats that challenge the system, as well as the criteria for appraising how that system develops in the context of exposure to these kinds of threats, have been the focus of resilience studies over the past few decades (Luthar et al., 2000). These core questions in resilience studies of individuals and examples of constructs measured are represented in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1**

*Core Questions in Resilience Research*

What are the Challenges?	How Is the Person Doing?	What Processes Support Success?
Risks	Criteria for Adaptive Success	Promotive or Protective Factors
Trauma	Developmental tasks	Neurobiological
Neglect	Mental health	Behavioural
ACEs*	Physical health	Familial and relational
Poverty	Happiness	Community
Natural disaster	Work achievement	Cultural
War	Caregiving	Societal

\* Adverse childhood experiences.

Consequently, Masten and colleagues (2018) summarise the salient aim of resilience research as differentiating what makes a difference; the ways that account for how adaptively (based on the criteria under study) persons can respond to the demands posed by the adversity under study.

### **2.3 The Four Waves of Resilience and the Emergence of the 5<sup>th</sup> Wave**

As is the case for the early stage of any science, the first wave of resilience focused on the *description* of the phenomenon. According to Richardson (2002), this

first wave emerged in the 1970s. It was concerned with phenomenological descriptions of 'resilient qualities' in individuals and systems that could predict personal and social success whilst protecting the individual from threats. This typically involved case reports and descriptions of people identified as at risk for poor outcomes yet appeared to be functioning reasonably well. These individuals and groups were compared to others with similar risk profiles yet depicted lesser success, as well as others who showed a similar profile of success yet did not have similar preceding risk profiles (Masten, 2015). According to Masten and colleagues (2018), the goal was to identify the factors that may account for these contextual differences of desirable adaptation despite adversity and signified the first resilience clues. This involved questions of 'how' and 'who' is resilient and preoccupations with how it would be measured (Masten, 2015). Researchers like Garmezy, Werner and Rutter began enquiring about what made a difference. This adjusted focus was salient since the populations studied were typically poor and neglected children expected to have the same deleterious outcomes (Werner et al., 1971). Except that they did not. Some children were able to bounce back despite the hardships that society expected should break them. Researchers wanted to know what made some children respond to severe threats in better-than-expected ways compared to peers and what factors may be involved within and outside the person that could account for this adaptation (O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013).

Researchers began investigating factors that might have assisted these at-risk children in overcoming the odds. Two approaches emerged: Person-focused and variable-focused methods. According to O'Dougherty Wright and colleagues (2013), the person-focused method sought to identify the characteristics of children with favourable outcomes compared to those who experienced poor outcomes in the

same situations. Selective strengths were highlighted as helping these individuals overcome adverse situations (Herrman et al., 2011). It was therefore viewed as a personal trait rather than a process. According to Van Breda (2001), resilience research in this early phase suggested that personal traits such as hardiness, self-efficacy, locus of control and sense of coherence are essential characteristics of resilience. The resilient child was described as invulnerable or invincible (O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). Garmezy (1971) distinguished the 'vulnerable' and 'invulnerable' of society and declared that through the study of forces that influence children to adapt, society benefits significantly more than efforts undertaken to create and promote prevention models to reduce vulnerability.

This initial preoccupation with resilience as an inherent, individual factor did not last, as researchers began to recognise that protective factors also existed beyond the individual. The variable-focused methods investigated the relationships between personal characteristics and their environments. Werner and Smith (1982) identified four aspects of resilience, promoting mechanisms from their longitudinal study that distinguished resilient youths from other at-risk youths. These resilient characteristics included: 1) Active problem-solving, 2) constructive perception of difficult things, 3) ability to cultivate positive interactions with others, and 4) utilising faith as a means of meaning-making. Resilient factors associated with the child, their families, communities, and environments were explored in determining what would promote positive outcomes for at-risk youths. Thus, research at the time generated comprehensive lists of potentially protective factors (Luthar et al., 2009; Mizuno et al., 2016).

First-wave conceptions of resilience research continue today and have attracted much criticism from scholars (see Garrett, 2016; Harrison, 2013). These researchers

argue that this approach places too much responsibility on the individual for their well-being and absolves the broader macro-structural players of society from dealing with adverse risks that influence child development (Van Breda & Theron, 2018). According to Masten and colleagues (2018), resilience is not a trait; however, individual differences in people (e.g., personality and cognitive skills) contribute to adaptive capacity.

Once researchers comprehended the factors involved in resilience, they shifted their focus to how these factors worked (Vela, 2019). To promote resilience, researchers needed to understand the processes involved. Thus, the second wave of resilience concerned itself with the explanatory *process* and how individuals possessed the ingredients needed to bounce back from adversity. One such conception included the process (or law) of disruption and reintegration described by Flach (1997), which outlined how individuals acquired the resilient qualities identified in the first wave of resilience. This two-step model postulated that adversity led to disruption, necessitating the individual to deal with said disruption through reintegration. He argued that all living structures have a homeostatic force that keeps pushing them toward coherence. Flach further asserted that the individual's homeostasis must be broken down (disrupted) to build it up again (reintegrate). This 'resilient reintegration' involved the individual gaining valuable insight from the adversity to produce growth and attain a more adaptive, higher homeostasis level.

However, it was only when Michael Rutter (1993) and Edith Grotberg (1995) began championing the role of contextual interactions between the individual and their environments that the second wave truly gained momentum. Rutter posited resilience as 'protective mechanisms within a dynamic model' where the individual actively reacts to the environment to emerge resiliently (Coronado-Hijón, 2016).

Thus, the reciprocal transaction between person and environment in promoting resilience over time emerged. This wave adopted a more developmental systems approach (e.g., families, groups, communities) that focused on positive adaptation in the context of risk and identifying protective factors within the environmental systems (O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). According to O'Dougherty Wright and colleagues, the salient factors were now more in the transactions among individuals and the various systems in which their development was rooted. Here, there was a movement from resilience being seen as an individualised trait to a dynamic interaction process between the individual and many systems within which the individual reacts and interacts. Accordingly, there are numerous causes and pathways to resilience. These pathways often interact with biological, social, and psychological means throughout the lifespan (Herrman et al., 2011).

Masten (2011) described that while exploring protective mechanisms were being undertaken to understand resilience processes better, children globally were still growing up in adversity without the luxury of time for science to run its course. Hence, the third wave of resilience marked the push to translate findings from the first and second waves into meaningful intervention strategies and programmes to promote resilience. This new focus led to experiments and theory testing in randomised controlled trials and confirmed that resilience could be promoted and make a difference in children's developmental trajectories (Oh et al., 2018). Masten and colleagues (2018) maintain that while it is challenging to evaluate the potential for adapting to risks and threats prior to positive adaptation to adversity, it is theoretically possible. The need to change developmental pathways by increasing strategies to identify adaptation capacity and actively promote resilience was emphasised. The experiments targeting the hypothesised resilience processes

began to take precedence in the research (Luthar et al., 2000). This direction proved to be a slow and challenging undertaking due to the challenges of undertaking longitudinal studies and the uncertainty in accepting a gold standard for measuring resilience (Göbbling-Reisemann et al., 2018). Regardless, the research and practice movement began involving actions intended to promote resilience (O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). In this phase, the assumption was that the effective promotion of resilience required exposure to risk and adversity – albeit controlled (Rutter, 2012). Questions about the best time to introduce intervention strategies were also deliberated. It was evinced that the timing and nature of the intervention could strengthen and prolong the resilient effects (O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). An explicit focus on testing theories of change (see Masten, 2011, 2018; Toth et al., 2011) continues to be a mark of third-wave resilience research. Ultimately, it is only by recognising the comprehensive processes fundamental to positive adaptation despite the conditions of adversity that researchers and practitioners will be able to intervene in vulnerable children's lives.

Over time, the potential for generating additional knowledge due to the advances in technologies and methodologies reflected the expansion of resilience as a science across multiple levels of analysis and initiated the fourth wave of resilience research (Göbbling-Reisemann et al., 2018). This new wave introduced multi-level research into genetic and brain levels to social interaction and systems-level (e.g., community resilience and global resilience). Researchers are now more concerned with how different systems contribute to an individual child's resilience (Masten, 2014). The fourth wave of resilience concerns epigenetic and neurobiological processes and how these processes and systems interact to shape development over time. This direction of resilience science is reported by O'Dougherty Wright and colleagues

(2013) as based on multi-level transactions between genes, neurobiological development and adaptation, behaviour, and context at various levels. This explanation also fits Masten's (2007) assertion that adaptation is inherently multi-level because development results from probabilistic epigenesis and the numerous interaction processes across multiple levels of function with gene-environment interplay.

Furthermore, resilience is more recently conceptualised as a multi-level phenomenon that operates across and interacts between multiple systems. The fourth wave of resilience, therefore, attempts to integrate the behavioural sciences with life and neurosciences to construe a multifaceted, holistic comprehension of resilience as a phenomenon (see Ebersöhn & Bower, 2013; Masten & Obradovic, 2006). Much of the current trends in fourth-wave resilience research seek to investigate gene and environment interaction (see Cicchetti, 2012; Elbau et al., 2019), differential susceptibility (see Belsky, 2013; Morgan, 2012), regulating maladaptive systems in the individual (see Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2016; Ong, 2019) as well as other integrative models of resilience (Acosta et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2017). According to Masten and colleagues (2018), the fourth wave of resilience can be described as being more focused on the integrative processes involved within and across multi-level, interconnected, and complex adaptive systems. These adaptive systems range from the molecular to the socio-cultural levels.

The fifth wave of resilience concerns developing a framework for addressing societal inequalities to mitigate risks for vulnerable children (Hart et al., 2016). Hart, known for her pioneering work with academic resilience, heads up the movement from the University of Brighton and the non-profit organisation, 'Boingboing' (reference to the 'bouncing back' aspect of resilience). The prevailing idea is that

resilience-based knowledge can influence broader adversity contexts. Here, resilience goes beyond the individual and their social environments to reach the macro structural systems of societies. Hart and colleagues (2016) describe resilience as overcoming adversity with the potential to transform such adversity. This idea aligns with Prilleltensky's (2005) assertion that resilience needs to be redefined as the ability to cope with adversity and the power to challenge the very existence of inequality and injustice in society. A focus on resilience as a social justice issue is gaining momentum such that 'changing the odds' has more salience than 'overcoming the odds' (Van Breda & Theron, 2018).

There is an increasing concern about the effects of threats such as war, poverty, climate change, and pandemics, and the resultant displacements of these disasters on the overall well-being of children (Masten et al., 2018). Consequently, these threats to child development, both present and future, can serve as a driving force of worldwide interest in resilience research that transcends the boundaries of multiple sectors and sciences.

#### **2.4 The Construct of Resilience**

The difficulty in defining the construct of resilience has much to do with the varied conceptualisations of the term. Researchers agree that any conceptualisation of resilience requires the critical components of risk and positive adaptation (see Luthar et al., 2020; Masten, 2014; Rutter, 2013; Ungar, 2012). Another comprehension of resilience considers developmental tasks in measuring risk and adaptation (Obradović et al., 2012). Developmental tasks are those expectations we, as a society, have for what children should do to be considered 'normative'. There are universal developmental tasks, including those developmental expectations across societies (e.g., sitting, walking, talking, and forming attachment bonds), that occur

regardless of cultural and environmental differences (Black et al., 2017). After that, it is expected that early childhood tasks such as following simple instructions, obeying parents, and learning how to behave in society are mastered before new expectations at school (e.g., reading, writing, learning mathematics, and getting along with one's teacher and peers) are negotiated. In adolescence, individuals begin to undergo puberty changes and master those tasks that would prepare them for adult society roles (Black et al., 2017). These are all examples of universal developmental tasks.

Additionally, those distinct developmental tasks are more culturally influenced and might be seen in one culture and not in another (Theron & Liebenberg, 2015). Rites of passage between childhood and adulthood are one such culturally-specific developmental task. In Australia, indigenous adolescent boys undertake what is commonly called "walkabout" to traverse the natural environment (Despres, 2008). This cultural practice is similar to the South African isiXhosa practice of *ulwaluko* as part of the initiation into manhood (Manona et al., 2018). These are two examples symbolising maturity in a specific cultural context. Other examples of distinct developmental tasks include religious rituals and practices in which youths learn specific sacred texts and commit to their faith as entwined into their culture (Masten, 2014). According to Hart and colleagues (2016), doing well or bouncing back after exposure to development threats has been a common and widely held conception of resilience. For example, a child's independence for navigating challenges in their environment can be compromised if an overbearing parent does not allow the child to experience normal risks and problem-solving. This obstruction can take the form of learned helplessness and increases the likelihood that the child will become dependent on the parent to negotiate threats for them. When the parent is educated

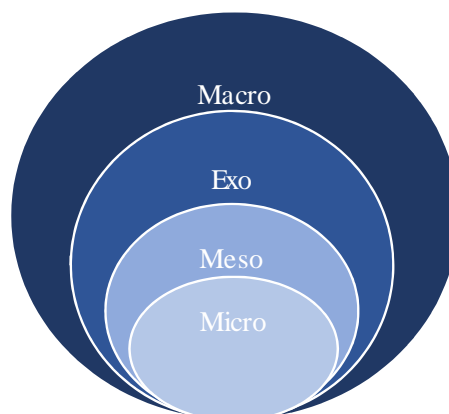
on the risks of over-involvement and allows the child to develop independence in healthy ways, the child can become less anxious and more confident to deal with adversity.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1995) postulated that a child's development is based on their interactions with many other systems of life, including family, the school system, peers, and the environments around them, as well as the broader socio-political and socio-cultural environments. Accordingly, the individual is part of a system of nested structures encompassing the person's environment. The child is a system that transacts with friends, family, and community at multiple system levels.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorised four nested structures: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. The chronosystem incorporated the temporal dimension of his model and was only added much later. These systems are reflected in Figure 2.1.

### Figure 2.1

*Nested Model of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory*



Bronfenbrenner, 1979

According to Bronfenbrenner, some systems are proximal and direct (e.g., a child interacting with their teacher), whilst others are indirect (e.g., a parent's work

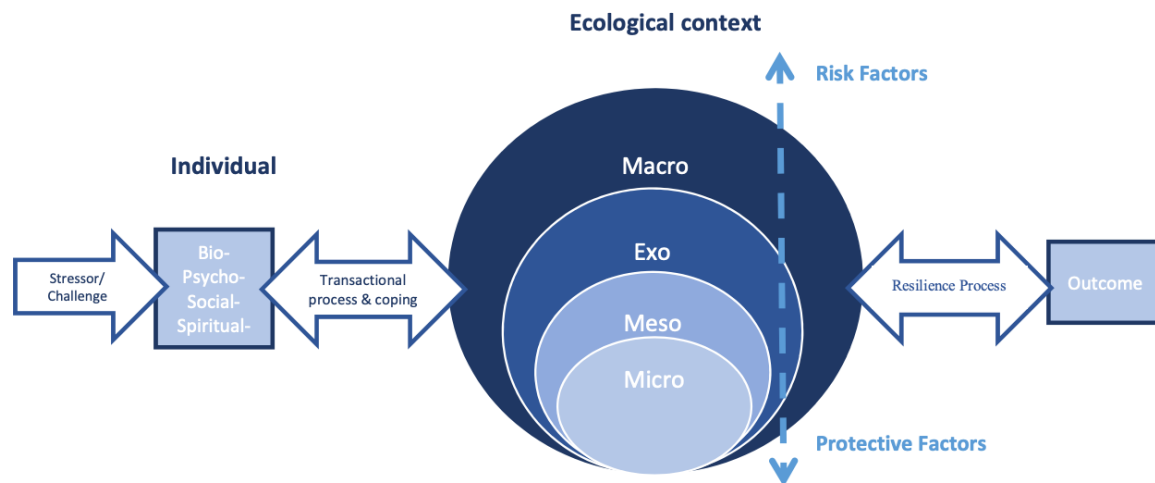
environment that may affect the family and child financially). These systems change over time – as do the risks and supports within the systems.

Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1983) asserted that an ecological development model was best for conceptualising the transactional processes by which children influence and are influenced by their social environments. This conceptualisation of how children develop over time has influenced how researchers explain how children interact with their environments to promote resilience (Theron, 2015; Ungar, 2011). According to Theron (2015), while there are many and varied interpretations of resilience, research that considers a social ecology conception is gaining popularity (see Rutter, 2012; Theron & Liebenberg, 2015; Van Breda & Theron, 2018, van Rensburg et al., 2015). This interpretation means that it is acknowledged that resilience changes over time depending on the dynamics of system interactions and the resources that the child can access in times of adversity (see Masten, 2015; Southwick et al., 2016; Van Breda & Theron, 2018). These child resilience interpretations advocate that positive adaptation or adjustment to adversity is a process of constructive and culturally congruent transactions between children and their environments. This perspective shifts the responsibility from the individual as the sole contributor. It acknowledges the vital role of agents in the child's environments in fostering resilience without dismissing the individual's agency. Theron (2015) maintains that positive adjustment depends on meaningful collaborations between children and their socio-cultural ecologies. This dynamic, van Rensburg and colleagues (2018) suggest, is how societies can shape children's life-worlds to be more conducive to resilience-building processes.

Kumpfer (1999) later developed a model for illuminating the processes and outcomes of resilience based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, as illustrated in Figure 2.2.

**Figure 2.2**

*Kumpfer's Ecological Context Model*



Kumpfer's model highlighted four key component domains that influence resilience. The components included the stressor (stimuli that disrupt the individual or system and trigger resilience processes), individual characteristics (multi-level internal assets across biological, emotional, behavioural, social, cognitive, and spiritual domains), environmental context (the external proximal and distal critical domains of influence and associated protective and risk factors), and the outcome (how individuals overcome adverse effects and avoid the trajectories associated with these risks). Kumpfer (1999) further delineated two transactional pivots between these domains. Here, resilience is depicted as a dynamic construct – both as process and outcome – predicted by prior positive adjustment.

The past decades have seen the emergence of psychology movements such as 'positive psychology' and 'happiness' (Layard, 2005; Seligman et al., 2000). These movements introduced a marked preference for researchers, practitioners, and

policymakers to emphasise the positive rather than the maladaptive (Mohaupt, 2008). Resilience separates itself from other positive approach constructs in the way positive adaptation is achieved: The first condition is that adversity must be considered more significant than the typical day-to-day challenges experienced by the population and reflect harmful life incidents quantitatively associated with adjustment issues (Vella & Pai, 2019). These are risks and vulnerabilities expected to (more often than not) give rise to adverse outcomes, while higher intensity and frequency are expected to lead to more severe outcomes. The second condition is that such individuals must evince positive adaptation; a positive response that enables them to achieve the functioning or outcomes of individual and environmental tasks despite this adversity. Thus, resilience became understood as a positive adaptation despite adversity (Luthar et al., 2014). This perspective explains why a child who evinces successful outcomes may be described as competent or adaptive but not necessarily resilient unless they have experienced the specific statistical magnitude of the defined adversity. Masten (2001) captured the essence of resilience in two words, "ordinary magic". Over the past fifty years of empirical research, this ordinary magic has been verified concerning individuals who have overcome significant hardship whilst demonstrating positive developmental outcomes.

Definitions of resilience continue to develop and evolve with advances in research. Resilience is not a term restricted to psychology; it is explored across disciplines from the economic/financial sciences, the natural and physical sciences, the medical sciences, and the social sciences (Herrman et al., 2011). The term resilience emanates from the Latin word *resiliens*, which refers to the elastic properties of a substance, and the verb *resilire*, which means rebounding or

bouncing back. In the economic/financial world, resilience can be described as an economy's ability to cope financially in uncertain times; in physics, resilience can refer to the degree of potential energy in an elastic material when deformed; in ecology, it refers to the ability of an ecosystem to return to its original state after being disturbed, or resisting damage. In the field of medicine, resilience embodies one's ability to recognise pain and its purpose to tolerate it until normalisation, or the body's ability to recover and heal from fatigue, injury, or disease. The term can be used in reference to the ability of countries and cities to deal with/protect their citizens against natural and manmade disasters such as political conflicts, climate change, social inequality, epidemics, and pandemics such as COVID-19, climate change, social inequality, economic instability, and even to describe cities' security against physical, social, and economic challenges (termed 'urban resilience').

Although empirical research on resilience has proliferated over the years, criticisms have been levelled at work in this area. These criticisms have generally focused on ambiguities in definitions and terminology, the multidimensional nature of resilience, instability in the phenomenon of research, and theoretical concerns (see Luthar et al., 2015).

#### **2.4.1 Ambiguities in Definition and Terminology**

Resilience has not been a simple concept to define. Furthermore, it is not merely a case of variance between the different faculties of study, such as the physical and natural sciences, medicine, ecology, or within these fields. According to Vella and Pai (2019), there continues to be a low agreement in the definition, understanding and measurement of resilience despite the phenomenon having been studied for several decades. Moreover, the ambiguities in the definition have put the construct validity of resilience into question and have attracted significant criticism (Fletcher &

Sarkar, 2013; Kolar, 2011; Van Breda, 2018). According to Bonanno and Diminich (2013), confusion about the phenomenon of resilience can also be attributed to the ambiguous use of a single term to describe different forms of resilience. Some define resilience as returning to the original state of being (bouncing back) (see Rutter, 2013). For example, the field of psychology has held that resilience refers to the capacity for adaptation and 'bouncing back' of an individual in the face of significant adversity (Windle, 2020). Thus, adversity (or significant risk) and positive adaptation must be present for resilience. In contrast, others may define it as achieving a better state (adaptation or 'steeling') (see Garmezy, 1993).

The growing number of varied definitions of resilience leads to increasing contradictions between the individual interpretations, and the concept is thus gradually watered down. As a result, it becomes more difficult to translate theory into practice and to precisely determine the goals, strategies, instruments, and actors in "promoting" resilience (Hanisch, 2016).

One of the salient risks in definitional diversity includes the many varied conclusions ascribed to the processes of risk and protection and the incongruent estimations for resilience rates among similar risk populations (Luthar et al., 2015). Thus, for statistics on resilience to be valid and reliable, there needs to be a universal understanding of the concept. In a similar vein, Masten and colleagues (2018) argue that "Global threats require integrated theories, knowledge, intervention, and training, all of which are facilitated by scalable definitions that can be aligned across sectors and disciplines" (p. 2). There is imperative to bring together the conceptions of resilience from all domains of study into one universally defined construct to mobilise efforts to meet the risks to development in our world.

However, the conceptualisation and definition of resilience have undergone considerable change over time (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Much of this can be put down to three points of contention. The first argument involves the question of 'when'; when should resilience exist or be evident? Those who interpret resilience as a trait may say it occurs before an unexpected or challenging event. Others insist it can only be observed *after* such an event (see Tarter et al., 1999). The second contention speaks to the circumstances in which resilience gains its relevance and therefore includes the question of 'what'; what constitutes adversity? Many may describe rare and devastating events such as natural disasters, epidemics, or the sudden death of a loved one – events that would typically be associated with lower expectations of recovery. Others may define the 'what' as more chronic risks associated with phenomena such as societal inequalities, prejudice, and historical poverty (Hart et al., 2016). The final contention involves the 'how'; how do we define the state of being after coping?

The myriad of contexts in which resilience exists makes these questions challenging to answer, which explains the divergent conceptualisations of the construct. However, Masten and colleagues (2018) assert that the data from the voluminous literature on resilience over the past two decades has shown extraordinary consistency. This consistency has led to what Masten et al. describe as a broad understanding of resilience that speaks to multiple levels and systems across disciplines, being the potential of a system to adapt positively to adversities that threaten the development of the system. This definition speaks to the capacity of a system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten that system's stability, life, or development (Denckla et al., 2020). This definition applies to an individual and when studying resilience in families, communities, organisations, economies, and

global issues (Isaacs et al., 2020). Masten and colleagues (2018) assert that this definition works because it is scalable – whether in small systems within a person's body or at a larger, global scale. There is a growing consensus that an individual's resilience is interdependent and related to the resilience of many other systems with which they interact.

A review of how the critical contributors to resilience research show congruence are indicated in the following expositions: Garmezy (1971) defined resilience as a discernible capability despite experiences with considerable stressors. He further described that resilience is "not necessarily impervious to stress; instead, resilience is designed to reflect the capacity of recovery and maintained adaptive behaviour that may follow an initial retreat or incapacity upon initiating a stressful event" (p. 7). Werner and Smith (1989) defined resilience as

People's capacity to cope effectively with the internal stresses of their vulnerabilities (such as labile patterns of autonomic reactivity, developmental imbalances, unusual sensitivities) and external stresses (such as illness, significant loss, and dissolution of the family) and to emerge unscathed and to develop a stable, healthy personality. (p. 4)

Rutter (2006) described resilience as an interactive phenomenon concerning the permutations of significant risks and a relatively adaptive psychological outcome despite such risks.

In the above descriptions of the term resilience, we see more agreement than divergence. Why, then, do so many conclude that there exists little consensus? According to Olsson and colleagues (2003), much of the challenge over the definition of resilience led to a substantial debate as to whether resilience constituted a trait, an outcome, or a process. An example of such confusion emerged with

disagreement in using the terminology 'resilience' and 'resiliency'. Much of the misunderstanding over resilience and resiliency emerged from the ego-resiliency literature in the 1980s (Block & Block, 1980). Here, ego resiliency referred to the set of traits that reflected such characteristics as self-esteem, flexibility, and hardiness, concepts familiar in the field of positive humanistic psychology. Moreover, Trivedi and colleagues (2011) posit that resilience may be considered a constellation of traits that include conscientiousness, optimism, and extraversion. Similar constructs such as hardiness, grit, well-being, stress resistance, and other concepts related to the positive psychology movement have often been erroneously conflated with resilience. Resilience, defined through the lens of a personal trait, is viewed as a stable characteristic of the individual, which permits one to moderate the effects of stress whilst being the protective ability when encountering adversity (see Ahern et al., 2008; Gooding et al., 2012; Hu et al., 2015).

When the conceptualisation of resilience is reduced merely to a trait or a set of individual characteristics, it changes how resilience is defined, measured, and operationalised. According to Ungar (2011), one of the signal criticisms for the trait perspective of resilience is the possibility of underestimating the contextual and external factors that foster resilience. For example, self-report measures that identify personal attributes are typically the mechanism for measuring resilience in a resilience-as-trait conceptualisation and tend to disregard family and environmental entities (Prince-Embury, 2006). In addition, Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) argue that self-report measures alone are not congruent with the current conceptualisation of resilience-as-process. The relationships between variables are essential for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic nature of resilience.

Therefore, there was a gradual movement to include contexts in the conceptualisation of resilience. According to Bonanno and Diminich (2013), most of the research concerning resilience in the developmental literature is predicated on positive adaptation in the context of chronic adverse experiences such as chronic poverty.

The shift in focus to positive outcomes in the context of pervasive and continuous adversity such as chronic poverty (Garmezy, 1993; Luthar, 1999), war, and natural disasters (Betancourt, 2011; Sander et al., 2003) lends itself to a contextual frame. This contextual lens emphasises the measurement of adjustment over time, focusing on long-term or distal outcomes (Masten & Narayan, 2012). Consequently, the distinction between resilience and maladjustment is challenging to discern until the adverse context has subsided. Bonanno and Diminich (2013) refer to this form of resilience as 'emergent resilience', which is distinguishable from the form of minimal-impact resilience conceptualised following an isolated potentially traumatic life event (PTE) (see Figures 2.3 and 2.4).

### Figure 2.3

#### *Minimal-impact Resilience*

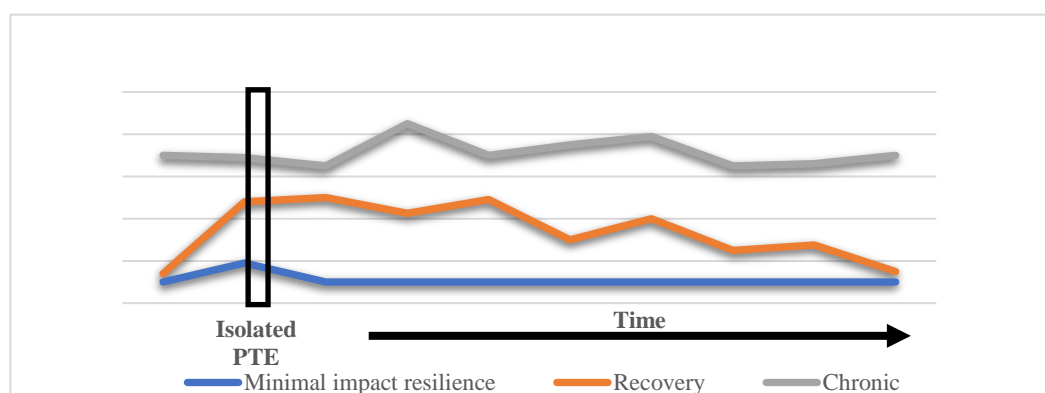


Figure 2.3 illustrates how minimal-impact resilience is a steady course of healthy adjustment post an isolated PTE. This is depicted in recovery as a gradual return to baseline. These PTE stressors produce transitory distresses in regular adjustment and functioning (de Kloet et al., 2011). Resilience following an isolated PTE is best measured as a stable trajectory of well-adjusted functioning before and after the event. There has been a shift in research into more isolated, acute life stressors and relatively proximal patterns of positive adjustment when considering mental health (see Bonanno & Mancini, 2012). This change is because the PTE threats and the parameters of outcome trajectories can be more easily observed and defined. By contrast, chronic adversity elicits more persistent patterns of variability, leading to more persistent changes in various psychological and physiological functions.

#### Figure 2.4

##### *Emergent Resilience*

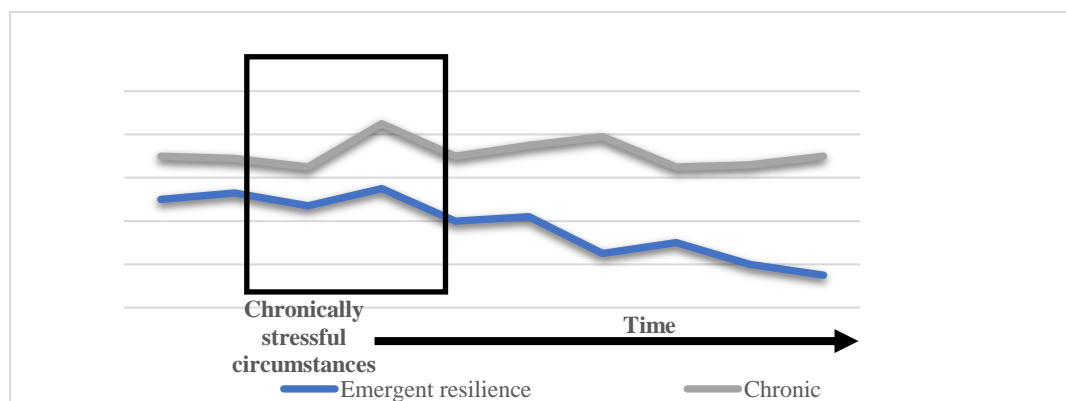


Figure 2.4 illustrates emergent resilience as a gradual process toward positive adaptation post chronic adverse circumstances. An example of this type of resilience may occur if a child experiences the challenges of being exposed to the continuous risks associated with a context of domestic violence at home. If this child comes to survive these threats and demonstrates normative development and culturally

appropriate expectations for competence, then they are described as resilient. According to Bonanno and Diminch (2013), the study of resilience in children has concentrated principally on chronic and continuous adversity and patterns of emergent resilience. Lately, developmental research has expanded to include those risks that are more isolated, such as those outlined by van Rensburg and colleagues (2015) as 'specific negative life events', one of the four categories of risk (e.g., natural disasters, death of a parent). However, a criticism of minimal-impact resilience research is that it tends to ignore the broader ecological context of the child. For this reason, the developmental sciences have typically focused on emergent resilience as it embodies context-specificity.

Since resilience is a context-specific concept, researchers should be wary of accepting a universal list of protective factors whilst assuming that these can be applied similarly to all groups and contexts (Fergus et al., 2005). Thus, it is crucial to consider that what constitutes adversity or risk for one child may not be so for another. As Vella and Pal (2019) describe, the individual also brings specific personal factors and predispositions – both negative and positive – that transact with the adversity and the potential for a positive outcome. Moreover, what can be considered a positive outcome also varies according to the individual in question. Therefore, resilience is not a static construct in which outcomes can be calculated based on specific positive or negative variables but rather is a dynamic process of a continuous transaction.

Extant literature defines resilience as a process whereby individuals engage in creative means within contexts of adversity whilst using protective mechanisms and processes to mitigate threats (see Theron, 2016; Van Breda, 2015). Ann Masten (2015) describes the conception of resilience as influenced by mediating processes

that foster positive outcomes. She further reflects that resilience is the capacity of a system to respond effectively to risks that threaten the system's function, survival, or development. Alternatively, Luthar and colleagues (2000) describe resilience as a dynamic process that involves positive adaptation despite substantial adversity. Process-orientated definitions of resilience tend to consider two premises: resilience is both dynamic – in that it is characterised by constant change – and context-specific – in that one can be resilient in one context and less so in another.

Windle (2011) defines resilience as involving managing, adapting, and navigating severe stressors by utilising resources across multi-level spheres to facilitate an ability to bounce back from adversity. In this definition, both individual and environmental factors that interact to foster resilient outcomes are recognised from a developmental perspective. Windle (2010) describes that utilising resources both within and around the person is necessary to promote resilience for a context-specific time that allows the individual to bounce back from adversity. Similarly, Ungar (2008) constructs a bridge between the individual and the environment to demonstrate further how resilience develops as a transactional process. He states:

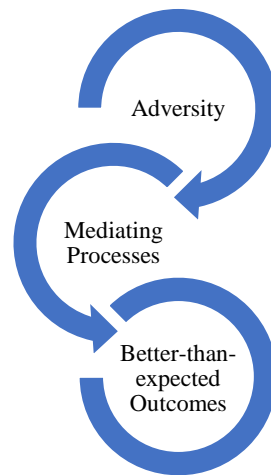
In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to *navigate* the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being and their capacity individually and collectively to *negotiate* for these resources to be provided and experienced culturally meaningful ways. (p. 225)

Here, again, the emphasis on resources within the individual and the environment forms an essential cog in the mechanism of fostering resilience. Ungar and Liebenberg (2011) further suggest that these resources must be negotiated to

navigate adversity. It is these mediating processes that determine the outcome following adversity. This dynamic is depicted in Figure 2.5 (see Van Breda, 2018).

### Figure 2.5

#### *Resilience as a Process*



Van Breda (2018) asserts that a feasible definition of resilience best incorporates the components of adversity, mediating processes, and better-than-expected outcomes with a particular focus on the mediating processes. This understanding of resilience is very much in line with Ungar's (2011, 2012) social ecology of resilience theory (SERT). Additionally, Van Breda (2018) opined that the debate regarding process and outcome in resilience theory tends to manufacture an unnatural divide. Ultimately, many authoritative resilience scholars hold the concept of resilience as stemming from many systems within the person's social environments (Cicchetti, 2013; Masten, 2018; Panter-Brick & Leckmann, 2013; Ungar, 2012; van Breda & Theron, 2018).

Both person-based and process-based understandings of resilience involve the aspects of risk and positive adjustment (Vella & Pal, 2019). Thus, the

conceptualisation of resilience informs how adversity and outcome are defined. The American Psychological Association (2014, para. 4) defines resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of threat". Similarly, Southwick and colleagues (2015) outline additional definitions of resilience with the commonality that all involve the process of adapting to and bouncing back from adversity. These authors maintain that resilience is seen as the potential of a dynamic system to respond effectively to problems that put the viability, function, and development of the system at risk whilst having the capacity to rein resources to maintain well-being.

Despite the extensive accumulation of literature over 50 years, much of the early findings still have relevance today (Bethel et al., 2017). According to these authors, there is an encouraging convergence of data across the literature from the initial undertakings by crucial contributors such as Garmezy (1985) and Rutter (1987) to more recent studies (Luthar et al., 2015; Masten, 2015). According to Masten and colleagues (2018), many of the essential protective factors identified in the early pioneering resilience studies remain central despite the significant advances in methodology, technology and multiple levels of analysis described previously in the fourth wave of resilience. This finding boasts well for resilience's reliability and validity over time as a unique field of science.

#### **2.4.2 *The Multidimensional Nature of Resilience***

The multidimensional nature of resilience refers to findings that some high-risk children exhibit competence in some domains but problems in other areas. For example, in their study Kaufman and colleagues (1994) found that over 60% of the cohort of at-risk children with histories of maltreatment were academically resilient, whilst only 21% of those displayed social capability. Similarly, some studies indicated

that adolescence who exhibited successful adaptation often struggled with psychological difficulties (such as mood disorders and post-traumatic stress) over time (Luthar et al., 1993). This divergence has led some researchers to question whether resilience is a truthful construct or a mythical entity (Liddle, 1994).

However, according to Infurna and Luthar (2017), one of the limitations of earlier longitudinal studies on resilience is that resilience was primarily considered a single trajectory whilst disregarding how specific individuals arrived at resilient outcomes.

Incidentally, it has been recognised that individuals may show different resilience trajectories (e.g., Hobfoll et al., 2010). For example, some vulnerable or at-risk individuals can demonstrate proficiency in certain facets of life only to show difficulty in other domains. Thus, children can be resilient in terms of a specific aspect and remain (or become vulnerable) in other areas. Moreover, individuals can also be resilient at a particular point or phase in life, only to experience vulnerability at a later junction (Denckla et al., 2020). Also, children exposed to an acute stressor may continue functioning as proficiently as before the event, whilst other children in a similar circumstance may evince lower functioning for a period only to bounce back and reclaim competence. Some may suffer delays in functioning without recovery, while others may exhibit continuous low functioning levels before and after the trauma.

Mahdiani and Ungar (2021) conclude that researchers have to remain sensitive when using terminology like resilience to imply that all adaptation under stress is optimal across all domains. Cognisance of the multidimensional nature of resilience should always be kept in mind. This implies that while an at-risk child may excel within a particular domain it should never obscure the possibility that significant problems may be experienced in other areas of functioning. Furthermore, it should

be recognised that all individuals, whether at-risk or otherwise, show fluctuations in adjustment over time. Therefore, uneven functioning across domains does not invalidate resilience as a construct. However, according to Luthar and colleagues (2015) this uneven functioning could carry a critical message for researchers – to specify the particular domains of inquiry, such as 'educational resilience' and 'emotional resilience'. This would bring greater precision to the terminology in resilience literature.

It should also be acknowledged that there is ample evidence that at-risk children who evince resilience in critical domains generally continue to reflect positive adaptation profiles over time, as shown for example in Werner's (1994, 1995) and Masten et al.'s (1999) research. Therefore, it could be safely stated that resilience is not necessarily a transient phenomenon (Luthar et al., 2000).

#### ***2.4.3 Instability in the Phenomenon of Research***

Concerns over the rigour of theory and research have given rise to both critique and increased research into the field of resilience. Two of the salient concerns involved in the instability of statistical findings are discussed by Luthar and colleagues (2000). These concerns involve the criteria used to define significant adversity and the requisite competence within a given study. The stricter the criteria, the more likely the research will end up with fewer resilient individuals, resulting in a small sample size. Conversely, if the criteria are less rigid, the findings will likely be trivialised. However, less stringent operationalised competence criteria, especially when dealing with harsh life adversities the number of resilient children in a sample could be far from trivial. In fact, the sample size does not provide a strong rationale for regarding resilience as a construct unworthy of scientific inquiry.

Additionally, research using variable-driven methods rely on critical or interaction effects to identify protective mechanisms (Luthar et al., 2000). Typically, findings reliant on key effect associations are more robust than those reliant on less stable interaction effects. Regardless, the number of individuals characterised as resilient will be contingent on the criteria applied to define both the significant adversity and the requisite competence or outcome. This circumstance creates room for disagreement among researchers on what phenomena classify resilience. Much of the problem concerns the varied ways the concept of resilience is defined. An individual has to be resilient against some type of adversity to be called resilient (Vela, 2019). This statement demonstrates the threat to validity and reliability in resilient studies, given the room for interpretation of 'some form of adversity'. One way to clarify how resilience phenomena are conceptualised is by clearly stating the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Van Rensburg and colleagues (2015) addressed this challenge by reviewing the literature within the South African context to identify four categories of risk with specific examples of adverse phenomena. These risk categories include challenging social and physical environments, specific negative life events, compound socio-demographic risks, and biological vulnerabilities. Creating a culturally and contextually relevant standard for conceptualising risk has far-reaching value for current and future research into South African resilience. Studies can be replicated within this context and, in so doing, increase the validity and reliability of phenomena.

#### **2.4.4 Theoretical Concerns**

One of the threats to the progress of resilience research is the tendency to rely too heavily on empirical over theoretical-driven studies (Van Breda, 2018). A limitation of

empirical-driven studies is that there is often less appreciation for the importance of multiple contexts across childhood development. Masten (2014) describes how researchers are tasked with understanding both universal and context-specific development to better understand the relationship between risk and adjustment. Therefore, more recent concern over the conceptualisation of resilience has involved the generic understanding of the construct across varied cultural contexts (Theron et al., 2013). Similar factors across contexts may inform resilience-fostering processes, but these resources are unlikely to be identical and notably reflect cultural and contextual influences (Ungar, 2011). Therefore, researchers have begun to recognise that the conceptualisation of resilience may be skewed toward hegemonic influences of Western premises of positive adaptation (Theron et al., 2013; Ungar, 2011).

Consequently, Theron and colleagues (2013) argue for exploring indigenous, culturally, and contextually responsive conceptualisations of youth resilience. Positively, much of the extant research in resilience has typically been guided by three major conceptual frameworks. The first is the triarchic context framework (Garmezy, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1982). Both protective and risk (vulnerability) processes are viewed as working across the domains of community, family, and the child. The second conceptual framework involves the transactions between the developing child and the child's ecological contexts (see Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993); and finally, the third theoretical framework of resilience deals with the structural-organisational perspective in which the child's agency is vital in influencing development over time (Ledesma, 2014).

Hoegl and Hartmann (2020) outline two challenges with resilience research relevant to the present study. The first challenge involves cross-level influences and

individual-to-collective resilience. According to King and colleagues (2016), a dominant research focus remains on the individual's resilience. Hoegl and Hartmann (2020) maintain that comparatively few studies have been undertaken on group or collective resilience. The authors argue that to appreciate resilience as unfolding at multiple levels of analysis that can include those collective contexts (e.g., communities, economies, industries), researchers must reflect such collectives as integrated systems comprising interdependent resilience processes.

According to Hartmann and colleagues (2020), little is known about the cross-level influences of multiple resilience processes in an adverse event such as SARS-CoV-2. The authors suggest that in the case of a global pandemic, social distancing behaviours can lead to societal resilience due to the flattening of the infection curve. However, social distancing may also reduce individual resilience to respond to adversity because of social isolation.

The second challenge involves resilience across and between cultures. According to Hoegl and Hartmann (2020), resilience research has shown a bias toward cultural majorities in western nations, including those instruments used to measure resilience (see Ungar, 2013; Windle et al., 2011). This partiality is regrettable, given that extant research suggests that culture and contextual embeddedness are essential in determining resilience (see Pangallo et al., 2015; Welbourne et al., 2015). According to Ungar (2013), despite the general agreement that universal mechanisms for fostering resilience exist (e.g., access to supportive relationships), there are resilience processes that may not unfold across cultures. This variability across cultures for promoting resilience is one reason Ungar (2008) recommends a culturally and contextually embedded understanding of resilience.

## 2.5 South African Resilience Studies

The context of South Africa is unique and dissimilar from Global North countries, where much of the resilience research is being undertaken. For example, South Africa's youth unemployment rate (ages 15 - 24) is about 53% (World Data Bank, 2019a). This statistic suggests that just over half of young people in South Africa are dependent on others or the state to meet their basic needs. The mechanisms for supporting youth development are increasingly complex, considering that the country also has the highest economic inequality, with a Gini coefficient of 63% (World Data Bank, 2019b). There is a marked discrepancy between those who can afford health care and those reliant on a stressed system to meet their daily needs. High poverty, crime, HIV/AIDS, domestic and interpersonal violence, undernutrition, and limited access to healthcare services are some of the significant concerns raised in the 2019 South African Child Gauge (Tomlinson et. al, 2022). According to Hall and Sambu (2016), South Africa has a high incidence of orphaned children, with 13% being single orphans and 3% being double orphans. Mosavel and colleagues (2015) describe the plight of children in South Africa as having exposure to high levels of daily threats in the post-apartheid context. Continuous exposure to such risks creates significant challenges when navigating adolescence without manifesting adverse outcomes (Mosavel et al., 2015).

The importance of researching how children overcome adversity cannot be understated. According to the country's socio-economic profile, more than one-third of the South African population are under fourteen (Stats SA, 2017). It is understandable, then, why much of the current research into resilience targets this population group, as these individuals are the most vulnerable and at risk for maladaptive development and adverse outcomes (Botha & Van den Berg, 2016).

Any research into resilience processes needs to consider the unique South African context when attempting to understand how some children overcome the odds. In the 2013 Child Gauge, Berry and colleagues maintained the imperativeness for researchers to provide compelling evidence of how and why youths in South Africa cope well with the risks discussed. Moreover, the South African Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005) emphasises the responsibility toward assisting youth towards resilient outcomes. Van Breda and Theron (2018) maintain that resilience among children in South Africa is essential to mitigate the impact of adversity in the context of severe structural disadvantage.

A critical review of research into the resilience of South African youth between 1990 and 2008 revealed a paucity in the field (Theron & Theron, 2010). The authors focused on the resilience processes of the self, family, community, and culture relevant to South African youths. Theron and Theron (2010) maintained that studies into South African youth resilience had (at the time) failed to describe the cultural and contextual foundations of resilience. Moreover, none of the available studies included two or more different settings. The review considered 23 academic journal articles between 1990 – 2008 that explored resilience among South African youth. The findings were compared to international studies in youth resilience along with the themes of contextual risks associated with violence (see Barbarin et al., 2000; Smukler, 1990; Ward et al., 2007), abuse (Collings, 2003; Edwards et al., 2005); poverty (see Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Mampane & Bouwer, 2006; Theron, 2007), AIDS and orphans (Ebersöhn & Maree, 2006; Germann, 2005), as well as low-resource communities and schools (Ebersöhn, 2008). The authors described that most questionnaires utilised in the articles were foreign measurements, and those few

developed in South Africa were not replicated in subsequent resilience studies in South Africa.

Additionally, the authors critiqued that the sub-scales of questionnaires focused more on *resources* associated with resilience (e.g., coping and hardiness) than resilience. Only five studies considered the lived experiences of youth – three of which were case studies. A further critique included that the qualitative studies focused exclusively on black youths.

A critical follow-up review of South African resilience studies was conducted by Van Breda and Theron (2018) from 2009 - 2017. The authors aimed to extend the focus on those resilience articles published by Theron and Theron's (2010) review of previous research into South African resilience studies 1990 - 2008. A total of 61 journal articles were reviewed to build on the processes identified by Theron and Theron's (2010) review. Van Breda and Theron focused on social-ecological resilience enablers in the personal and relational domains. The systematic review categorised four domains of resilience, ordered from micro to macro: personal, relational, structural, and spiritual/cultural. The findings indicated that two-thirds of the articles reviewed were qualitative research, representing a significant shift in approach from the 1990 - 2008 review. The designs included case study, narrative, phenomenology, and grounded theory.

Moreover, data collection methods comprised a variety of approaches that included individual interviewing, visual methods (e.g., write-and-draw, clay modelling, sand tray and the Mmogo-method™), projective methods, focus groups and community mapping. The majority of these studies focused on youth aged 13 - 24. Another finding indicated that there remained a focus on young, black participants. There was a decline in quantitative and mixed-method designs for studying the

processes of youth resilience in South Africa. This review of the literature suggests that contemporary researchers in the field of youth resilience favour an approach that deals with a more profound understanding of the individual experience of fostering resilient outcomes in the context of adversity.

Van Rensburg and colleagues also systematically reviewed critical commentaries on international youth resilience studies (2015). This research was executed to compare and contrast quantitative South African youth resilience research against international commentaries. The authors found that most published studies on South African youth resilience did not contribute meaningfully by adding to the existing knowledge regarding the person to ecological transactions. According to Van Rensburg et al. (2015), the challenges intrinsic in the reviewed quantitative studies of South African youth resilience are predominantly associated with outdated and tacit theoretical frameworks that inform the conceptualisation and operationalisation of analysis.

Among the problems Van Rensburg and colleagues outlined, many studies described resilience as too simplistic a process, failing to explicate the complexity and culturally associated transactional dynamic that characterises the resilience process. Moreover, the paucity of longitudinal studies regarding pathways toward resilience was also identified as a critical weakness. Other limitations Van Rensburg and colleagues recognised included methodological flaws in measuring resilience, as most of the studies reviewed utilised invalid Western scales, which may well have invalidated results (Theron et al., 2015). Additionally, the scarcity of published psychometric results further restricts the validity of scales available for South African youth, limiting the researcher's repertoire of culturally appropriate tools to measure resilience (Van Rensburg et al., 2015). The resilience construct is not universally

simple to measure; as Ungar (2013) asserts, contextual and cultural influences mould resilience. That being said, appropriate and contextualised scales for specific populations are required for a meaningful appreciation of resilience processes.

However, it is not just the resilience that lacks contextualised scales of measure but also the constructs underpinning the conceptualisation of resilience. According to Van Rensburg and colleagues, there is a shortage of direct measures for risks, which significantly affects how resilience and adversity are related. Resilience implies functional outcomes despite adversity. This conceptualisation is definitively dissimilar from functional outcomes beyond the context of adversity which is more aligned to what Ungar (2013) refers to as 'coping', not resilience. Thus, there underlies the possibility that those studies on resilience that either excluded or failed to specify measurements of risk (see Bloemhoff, 2006a, 2006b; 2012; MacDonald et al., 1996; De Villiers & Van den Berg, 2012) may have been measuring coping rather than resilience. This conflation of constructs was previously critiqued by Theron and Theron's (2010) review indicating that the conflation of resilience and sub-scale associations of resilience remains a threat to our understanding of youth resilience processes. If research fails to isolate and measure risk factors and protective factors, it creates ambiguity as to what informs the resilience processes of youths (Luthar et al., 2000).

Ultimately, Van Rensburg and colleagues (2015) concluded that the reviewed South African youth resilience studies did not adequately mirror the international strides in conceptualising and measuring resilience as a complex transactional process. Therefore, there is still much to uncover regarding how South African youths transact with their ecologies on pathways to resilience. According to Masten (2012), researchers must ground quantitative research designs in contemporary

theoretical frameworks. In this way, as Luthar and colleagues (2000) maintain, the socio-cultural milieu of youths can be meaningful to transactional person-ecological conceptualisations of resilience. Additionally, according to Van Rensburg and colleagues (2015), grounding research in up-to-date theoretical frameworks would inspire understandings and operationalisations of resilience and selecting resilience scales that agree with the theoretical and methodological advancement made in resilience studies elsewhere. Furthermore, an increase in socio-culturally sensitive explanations of South African youths' resilience can be fostered.

However, some South African studies do reflect current conceptualisations of youth resilience and the validity of instruments designed for some sections of the South African youth context. One such study was undertaken by Mampane (2012), who reported on the reliability of the Resilience Questionnaire for Middle-Adolescents in Township Schools (R-MATS) used with South African youth from low-resource areas. The study validated the importance of individual, cultural and contextual forces for the transactional resilience process in South African youth. The R-MATS was reliable for measuring resilience among adolescents in low-income environments. In addition, the Pathways to Resilience Project Advisory Panel (see Theron, 2013) is an ongoing community-based research (CBPR) project focusing on how at-risk youths use formal and informal services to promote resilient outcomes. This intervention became known as *Khazimula*, which means 'to shine', a social-ecological understanding of resilience based on a local understanding of youth resilience (Theron, 2018). The intervention operationalised by *Khazimula* aided teachers, youth leaders and service providers across the country who undertook to advocate for the resilience of children challenged by structural disadvantage (Theron, 2017).

While quantitative studies of South African youth resilience remain few over the past decade, qualitative studies in the field of youth resilience have been increasingly more accessible (see Ebersöhn et al., 2015; Mampane, 2014; Odendaal & Moletsane, 2011; Pienaar et al., 2011; Van Breda & Theron, 2018). A study by Mosavel and colleagues (2015) also researched the resilience processes of at-risk adolescents from low-resource environments. The research team used a phenomenological approach to investigate the pathways adolescents in South Africa used to overcome adversity by examining the narratives of future aspirations of South African youth and how these aspirations were associated with resilience factors framed by their lived contexts.

A recent exploratory study by Van Breda (2018a) aimed to identify the resilience processes of adolescents transitioning into South African tertiary education. The research focused on vulnerable students from the University of Johannesburg who were indicated to be resilient. Here, relational resources in home communities and a love for learning emerged as key protective factors in youth resilience pathways. Another study by Van Breda (2018b) compared youth resilience in terms of individual, family, and community protective factors across multiple sites, including schools in low-resource communities, child and youth care centres, and middle-class suburban environments. Of interest is that contrary to the researcher's hypotheses, the study indicated that two of the sites with the highest levels of resilience were located in a poor community setting and a children's home. Van Breda asserted that his research findings suggested that any child can be resilient in any social environment and that the resilience processes of children from impoverished and low-resource settings can equal and even exceed those evinced by children in wealthier better-resourced environments. Again, as with Van Breda's study with

resilient youths in university, relational resources scored high, with five of thirteen resilience constructs accounting for relationships across the seven sites. Community safety and social activities also accounted for critical protective factors in the resilience processes. Van Breda (2018b) concluded that protective factors exist in every ecology. The author continues that identifying and developing such protective mechanisms can help youths with the necessary skills to overcome future threats and risks whilst advancing toward independence and active citizenship.

Table 2.2 summarises the resilience studies conducted in South Africa from 1990 to 2017. The reviews of Theron and Theron 2010, as well as Van Breda and Theron (2018), are depicted below to illustrate the comparison between the two periods. Of interest is the nearly three-fold increase in research output.

**Table 2.2**

*Comparison Summary of South African Resilience Studies Designs 1990 - 2008 & 2009 – 2017*

1990-2008 review	
Design	Number of studies
	(23)
Quantitative	9
Qualitative	5
Mixed Methods	7
2009-2017 review	
Design	Number of studies
	(61)
Quantitative	18
Qualitative	40
Mixed Methods	3

An emphasis on fifth-wave transformational resilience work has increasingly become a focal point for current researchers, particularly in countries where significant disparities exist between 'the haves' and 'the have nots' (Hart et al., 2016).

Attention is mounting toward translating empirical evidence into operationalising guidelines for practitioners and developing intervention programmes for at-risk populations (Van Breda & Theron, 2018). Advocating for change that may decrease or defer risks to a vulnerable population is one way of promoting the well-being of youth (Hart et al., 2016). However, according to van Breda and Theron (2018), while a transformational focus is valuable, "the usefulness of transforming evidence into resilience-focused interventions can be hampered when the demand for interventions exceeds the supply" (p. 238). Emerging economy contexts, such as South Africa, do not have sufficient professionals to adequately meet the needs of significant numbers of at-risk children and limit the capability to execute evidence-based interventions (Theron & Theron, 2014).

One of the main challenges is translating more Westernised Global North interventions into the African context because of cultural variances. In the same way, resilience-enabling interventions in a rural Global South context are unlikely to yield as effective outcomes as those established in an urban Global South context due to the dynamic nature of the resilience process (Van Breda & Theron, 2018). From this, it can be said that there is little known about how South African children foster resilience while transacting with their ecologies. Despite those South African researchers seeking to study youth resilience from a social-ecological perspective (see Liebenberg et al., 2016; Theron, 2018; Van Breda, 2018; Van Rensburg et al., 2017), there remains a paucity in the field of South African youth resilience for studying *how* children and adolescents transact with their environments in personal, relational, structural, and spiritual/contextual ways. The spiritual/cultural context, in particular, is a domain in need of more attention as most studies in South Africa tend

to focus on the structural factors involved in risk and protective processes (Theron & Van Breda, 2018).

Cultural context plays a significant role in whether a particular characteristic/factor serves an individual toward protective or vulnerable functions. Obradovic and colleagues (2012) postulate that an individual characteristic may serve as a protective mechanism in one context while the same characteristic might tap vulnerability in another. What may appear to be valued as a protective factor in one culture (e.g., independence in Western culture) may be seen as a vulnerability or risk factor in an African culture that values interdependence and community support, as is the case with *Ubuntu*. Understanding the unique processes and transactions between individuals and their local contexts is vital since people may have similar individual characteristics or strengths yet transact with their environments in very different ways. There is a consensus among scholars that there is minimal research into resilience processes for specific groups of children in majority-world contexts (see Van Breda, 2018; Theron, 2016).

Moreover, how these processes are culturally and contextually relevant to these children is also largely unknown (Panter-Brick, 2015; Ungar, 2013). The burgeoning question is then, '*how does this child, at this time, navigate environments and negotiate for resources within their social ecologies despite adversity?*' According to Ramphela (2012), case study research represents a valuable approach to conceptualising the resilience-building processes of young people. Moreover, Ramphela (2012) recommends that these case studies be repeated through longitudinal research over time, given that the South African context is characterised by socio-cultural flux. It is anticipated that longitudinal case study research may

support a better understanding of how cultural values and practices allow for resilience and the longevity of these influences.

The critical point is establishing guidelines for dealing with vulnerability/risk factors and socio-ecological resilience enablers within a South African context. Two salient South African studies have compiled risk categories (see Van Rensburg et al., 2015) and resilience enablers (see Van Breda & Theron, 2018) based on reviews of South African research on resilience and child development.

### **2.5.1 Vulnerabilities and Risks in South African Resilience Studies**

According to Dawes (1994), since the end of Apartheid, addressing risk factors has been ubiquitous in developing interventions to support at-risk youths in South Africa. This focus on supportive interventions is understandable, given that one-third (34%) of South Africa's population is under 18. Moreover, children in South Africa face significantly higher challenges than in other, more economically advantaged nations. The threats to health and development begin at conception. Risk factors such as prenatal malnutrition, HIV-infected mothers, violence against pregnant women, and lower access to health-related services for many mothers in South Africa remain issues to address. The South African Child Gauge (2019) describes that many early threats to development result from insufficient attention to preventable conditions associated with child health. Moreover, a failure to respond to the social causes of child health includes chronic poverty and unemployment coupled with political factors affecting the low accountability of the child health Constitutional mandate.

Lake and colleagues (2019) maintain that too many children and adolescents in South Africa die from preventable causes. The authors identify that one in four children is at risk for chronic malnutrition, as observed in the prevalence of stunting.

According to Hall and Budlender (2016), almost one-third of South African children cannot afford a minimum balanced diet. Moreover, one in four pregnant women in South Africa is HIV-infected (Stats SA 2020).

Van Breda and Theron (2018) reviewed the dominant risks associated with adverse outcomes in South African youths. The most prominent among these (explicit in 22 articles) included structural disadvantage. This risk category includes poverty and under-resourced life in township communities with low social, health and educational resources and services. The authors also identified other salient adversities faced by South African children, including orphanhood, street involvement, residential care, disability, child-headed households, various forms of violence, HIV/AIDS, and parental divorce. Van Rensburg and colleagues (2015) noted that a precondition for resilience included a lived risk experience. Thus, while significant adversities remain threats to healthy development, they also present recipes for cultivating resilience to overcome threats.

Van Breda and Theron (2018) identified four risk categories in a review of quantitative studies of South African youth resilience. These categories included: Challenging social and physical environments, specific adverse life events, compound socio-demographic risks and the impact of biological vulnerabilities (see Table 2.3).

**Table 2.3**

*Risks and Vulnerabilities of South African Children*

Categories of Risk	Examples
a) Challenging social and physical environments	Community violence, gangsterism, ineffective schools and education.
b) Specific adverse life events	The death of a parent, parental divorce, substance abuse, maltreatment (all forms of abuse and neglect), epidemics (HIV/AIDS), and pandemics (COVID-19).

- c) Compound socio-demographic risks    Poverty, prejudice (all forms), urban/rural locations and informal/formal housing situations.
- d) Biological vulnerabilities                Genetic predispositions, disability, disease, premature birth, malnutrition, neurodevelopmental disorders.

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Based on Van Rensburg et al., 2015

**2.5.1.1 Challenging Social and Physical Environments.** According to Rother and colleagues (2019), children in South Africa reside, learn, and play across varied environments that promote or reduce health and development. Environmental consideration is essential because children are at greater risk of a broad spectrum of threatening environmental exposures since their bodies and brains are still developing. The World Health Organisation (2020) cites that environmental threats account for a quarter of childhood mortality and disease burden in children under five. These challenging physical environmental exposures can be classified into four categories (reflected in Table 2.4)

**Table 2.4**

*Environmental Exposures to Children's Health*

	Infectious and parasitic diseases	Neonatal conditions and malnutrition	Non-communicable diseases	Injuries
Disease burden	- Respiratory infections - Diarrhoeal diseases - Malaria - TB transmission	- Neonatal conditions - Protein-energy malnutrition - HIV invitro transmission	- Cancers - Mental, behavioural and neurological disorders - Congenital anomalies	- Unintentional - Intentional
Exposure	- Air pollution - Contaminated water - Inadequate sanitation and hygiene	- Mother's exposures - Chemicals	- Pesticides - Climate change - Indoor allergens.	- Poisonings - Drownings - Violence

World Health Organisation, 2017

Environmental exposures have also been correlated with transgenerational epigenetic changes. These transgenerational effects are due to the complex and dynamic interaction between an individual's biology and environment and how this

shapes health and development over time (Lake et al., 2019). An environment that cannot sustain and promote healthy development in children remains a salient concern for sub-Saharan countries, of which South Africa is no exception (Kidman & Palermo, 2016). According to UNICEF (2020), of particular concern for South African children's physical environments include inappropriate waste disposal services, long distances to the nearest health care centres, poor and variable access to early childhood education, and living in shelters with roofs, walls and floors made of rudimentary non-permanent materials.

Negative social aspects of physical environments also present significant threats to youths in South Africa. Gangsterism involves social groups within geographical areas that exert control and power over territory, typically through illegal activities (De Wet, 2016). According to Pinnock (2019), high levels of youth unemployment and a history of community powerlessness post-Apartheid contribute to gang culture. Research by Van der Linde (2018) suggested that some 70% of crimes within specific areas of South Africa were gang related. Youths are especially vulnerable targets, as De Wet (2016) reported incidents of young children entering gangs as young as nine. Bernstein (2017) describes that youths with little hope for further education or access to employment view gang involvement as the only way to secure a future.

Community violence presents another threat to children in South Africa. Community violence refers to exposure to acts of violence in the neighbourhoods where families live. It involves exposure to intentional acts of violence, especially interpersonal violence, committed in public areas by individuals who are not intimately related to the victim (Louw & Louw, 2022). Common types of community violence that affect youths include individual and group conflicts such as bullying,

gang wars, shootings in public areas, looting and destruction of public or private property. One characteristic of community violence is that it can happen suddenly and without warning; consequently, families who live within these conditions often have heightened fears that harm could come at any time, and therefore they experience their world as unsafe and terrifying (see Louw & Louw, 2022).

South African children suffer one of the highest rates of violence in the world, with a homicide rate five times the global rate (Kaminer et al., 2013). Rates of violence in the country have been steadily rising, with increases in other crimes, including sexual offences, assaults, carjackings, robberies and burglaries, at an all-time high (SAPS, 2017). According to studies by Ward et al. (2001, 2007, 2018), children who witness violence are significantly more at risk for various adverse mental health outcomes, and persons with poorer mental health are more likely to witness and perpetrate violence. Donenberg et al. (2020) state that youths experience significant barriers to long-term health due to community violence exposure. Thus, communities where violence occurs intensely and frequently tend to demonstrate generational violence correlated with adverse developmental outcomes for children.

Additionally, the recent epidemic of gangster-based violence in the country has drawn global attention to the plight of women and children. According to Matthews (2018), when children experience or witness violence, the long-lasting adverse effects are wide-ranging. Such consequences include an increased tolerance for violence, increased mental health problems, higher engagement with drug and alcohol abuse, risky sexual behaviours, contracting HIV, behavioural patterns of aggression, delinquency, and poor social functioning. Additionally, patterns of intergenerational violence can lead to violence-supportive social norms. These

violent social norms can cultivate silence about sexual and other forms of violence in communities (Flood & Pease, 2006).

Another sphere of challenging social environments resides in ineffective schools and education. School non-attendance and learner dropout rates remain a salient concern for South Africa as these children have an increased likelihood of maladjusted developmental trajectories (Dass-Brailsford, 2005). Shung-King and colleagues (2019) identified three main categories for school non-attendance amongst South African youths. The first category includes system failures. System failures encompass those problems related to exclusion and quality of education that account for approximately 25% of all non-attendance. It is reported that 10% of children who do not attend school in South Africa describe education as 'useless' or 'not interesting'. In comparison, 9% are unable to perform, with 5% dropping out due to failure. It is reported that 7% of children do not attend school due to exclusion because they were not accepted for enrolment (Shung-King et al., 2019). Access to schools remains a challenge given the distances between children's homes and educational facilities, with many children travelling more than 30 minutes to get to school. Additionally, roads are often not in good condition, neighbourhoods may be too dangerous to navigate routes to school, and weather conditions (such as flooding) can lead to drowning or inaccessibility from bridges being washed away. The authors maintain that financial barriers represent the second major category for non-attendance. 13% of children do not attend school because their families cannot afford the tuition, uniform costs, or transport fees. Moreover, many children are expected to work to support their families, with 4% involved in child mining and 2% involved in family business commitments. The final category includes disability or illnesses, accounting for 30% of non-attendance. Children with disabilities typically

require extra support and specialised schooling. Many families in South Africa cannot afford the interventions required to support school attendance when their children have special education needs. Therapies are expensive and specialised schools are often unavailable in outlying areas.

**2.5.1.2 Specific Adverse Life Events.** Specific adverse life events refer to those acute occurrences that would typically be expected to cause significant distress compared to more typical daily challenges that individuals encounter. Examples of such events might include parental divorce, the death of a parent or caregiver, natural disasters, epidemics and pandemics, maltreatment, and other negative experiences. According to the General Household Survey (2019), children in South Africa experience the loss of a parent or caregiver – death, divorce, or abandonment – at a high rate. The divorce rate in South Africa stands at 18% per annum, according to Statistics South Africa (2019). However, 4 in 10 South African marriages do not reach the decade landmark. Therefore, almost half of South African children born into marriage are likely to experience divorce of their parents before they turn ten years old. This statistic does not account for children born into single-parent homes or those whose parents are never married and separate. According to research undertaken by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2017, nearly 60% of South African children have absent fathers, while 42% of South African mothers are single parents. Only 4% of children live with fathers as single parents. Moreover, 20% of children under the age of 17 do not live with either parent, while one in five children in South Africa experiences the death of a parent or caregiver before age 18.

Global pandemics and epidemics also represent specific adverse life events. The impact of HIV/AIDS on South African children has been devastating. South Africa has the world's largest HIV/AIDS epidemic, with close to 8 million people currently

living with HIV (Stats SA, 2021). An estimated 17 million children have lost at least one parent to HIV/AIDS; 90% reside in sub-Saharan Africa, and more than 3 million children live with HIV/AIDS (USAID, 2016). Every day in South Africa, some five thousand people are infected with HIV, and a further two-and-a-half thousand people die from AIDS-related causes (Key Demographic Indicators: South Africa, 2019). Statistics indicate that while rates are typically stable or declining in sub-Saharan Africa, the infection rate in South Africa continues to increase (South Africa Prevalence of HIV, 2020). In 2020, HIV prevalence in South Africa was 19%, growing at an average annual rate of 2%. According to the Medical Research Council of South Africa, 30% of all deaths in the country are attributable to HIV/AIDS.

There are both indirect and direct effects of HIV on the developing child. The adverse effects on child development have been highlighted in South Africa as a significant concern (see Richter, 2004; Sherr et al., 2014, 2018). Sherr and colleagues (2018) describe that children infected with HIV are twice as prone to stunting and almost three times as likely to be underweight. Aside from generally weaker physical functioning children are also more likely to exhibit lower cognitive ability.

The 'orphan epidemic' in South Africa is significantly correlated with the effects of HIV/AIDS. These orphans are left with increasingly vulnerable carers; elderly grandparents, young siblings, and relatives who are themselves infected with HIV (Gilborn, 2002). Moreover, the quality of parenting, daily stimulation, nutrition, health care, and home environment can compromise caregiving due to the clustering of HIV infection (Sherr et al., 2018). The plight of children living in the context of HIV/AIDS is discussed by Gow and Desmond (2002) regarding the evidence that HIV is anticipated to impact child health indicators, mortality of young adults and orphaned

children. The authors include that children orphaned due to AIDS are the most at-risk in society due to the double blow of both needs to survive and face the context of discrimination physically.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also significantly affected South African children's lives. A report by UNICEF (2020), before World Children's Day on November 20, 2020, outlined how COVID-19 affected South African children's safety, nutrition, and health whilst disrupting their education. The report describes that the vulnerability to inequality, unemployment, poverty, gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against children (VAC) has been amplified by the fallout of COVID-19.

One of the initial challenges included navigating the misinformation around the virus, which, according to the World Health Organisation's (2020) paper on managing the 'infodemic', significantly increased anxiety and fear among children in South Africa. Moreover, data from the District Health Information Systems (Nov 2020) indicated a drop in HIV testing in children, visits to clinics, collection of medications and routine vaccinations for other diseases. Food and nutritional needs became the most critical issue to address for the government. De Lannoy and colleagues (2020) stated that in response to a UNICEF U-report SMS platform survey, 44% of respondents indicated that family food packages represented the most immediate need for youths in South Africa. This food shortage was encumbered by the closure of schools for some three-and-a-half months, resulting in approximately 9 million children missing school meals.

According to Hillis and colleagues' (2021) research, South Africa has the highest number of COVID-19 orphans on the continent, with 94 625 lost parents and guardians between March 1, 2020, and April 30, respectively, 2021. Therefore,

approximately one in every 200 South African children has lost a primary caregiver to the COVID-19 virus.

The pandemic has had severe consequences for children's safety and well-being. Childline South Africa reported an increase in calls by 36% in August 2020 compared to the same month in 2019. UNICEF describe that reporting on child abuse increased whilst the capacity to reach such children decreased due to disruptions affecting essential child protection services. These disruptions resulted in some children being trapped with their abusers in domains where others cannot see the abuse.

The COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, has had a compounding effect of specific adverse life events as children have to deal with sudden changes in schooling and living arrangements, increased violence and abuse, and the deaths of loved ones.

Table 2.3 indicates substance abuse as another adverse life event risk factor. This constitutes not only the adverse effects on children who suffer because of their parent's substance abuse but also on children who abuse substances themselves. Substance abuse by parents often leads to domestic violence, failed marriages, poor parenting skills, and unemployment. A family member with a drug problem can devastate the family's life, such as arousing complex emotions, fracturing family values, and advancing family dysfunction (see Louw & Louw, 2022; Mathibela et al., 2019). According to Kaswa and De Villiers (2020), substance use disorders in South Africa is twice the global average. The most common substances South African youths use inhalants such as cannabis, followed by methamphetamine (tik), amphetamine and heroin. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Olawole-Isaac and colleagues on substance use among adolescents (aged 10 - 19) in sub-Saharan Africa were undertaken between January 2000 and December 2016. The study

found that 37% of Southern African youths had used substances. In the Second Biennial Substance Abuse Summit, the general secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) described that youths adopt perceptions of worthlessness and hopelessness because of poverty and unemployment.

Additionally, these children tend to drift toward substance use and abuse to escape the thoughts of being unable to secure jobs to support a worthwhile life.

Apart from damaging physical effects that could lead to death, the psychological consequences of substance abuse are also extensive and profound. Examples of behaviour associated with drug abuse by children include poor academic performance and school dropout, conflict with authority figures such as parents and teachers, antisocial and criminal behaviour, and becoming involved in unhealthy friendships with people with similar problems. Although different substances can have different effects, mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety are among the most common long-term effects (see American Addiction Centers, 2021; Louw & Louw, 2022). A particular concern is that many children access their substances at school through fellow learners, spaza shops near schools, or drug peddlers over the school fence (Manu & Maluleke, 2017). A further concern is using these substances (especially alcohol, nicotine, and marijuana) on the school premises.

Maltreatment refers to the neglect or abuse of another person, which may involve emotional, sexual, or physical action or inaction, the severity or chronicity of which can result in significant harm or injury (APA, 2021; also see Louw & Louw, 2022). Various forms of neglect can be physical, emotional, or educational. Physical neglect involves inadequate supervision and failure to provide adequate housing, nutrition, and medical care. Emotional neglect occurs when the basic psychological needs for

psychological care are not met, such as refusing or neglecting to provide emotional affection or exposing the child to conflict between the parents. Educational neglect involves failing to enrol a child in school and allowing truancy. Educational neglect is not only limited to parents and other caretakers. The South African government plays a significant role in that South Africa's educational system compares dismally with many other and even poorer African countries. For example, in the World Economic Forum 2016 - 2017 Global Competitiveness Report, South Africa's primary education system was rated 126<sup>th</sup> out of 138 countries. Several factors contribute to this disaster, such as teacher absenteeism, poor infrastructure and lack of resources, and low-quality teaching. Many shortcomings breach the government's international human rights obligations and its Minimum Norms and Standards for educational facilities. Thus, by any objective standard, the education system is failing both students and the country (Amnesty International, 2020; Department of Basic Education, 2019; World Education services, 2017).

While neglect is caused by inaction, in the case of abuse, there is definite action to cause another person physical or psychological harm. Physical abuse refers to any physical act of aggression; sexual abuse refers to any illegal sexual act committed against a child; and emotional abuse is described as the persistent and continual emotional maltreatment of a child characterised by amongst others, verbal belittling and humiliation, deliberately ignoring a child, verbal or cyberbullying, threatening abandonment, exposure to antisocial or criminal activities, deliberate isolation (HM Government Report, 2018; Wekerle & Smith, 2019).

There is cumulative evidence that child maltreatment is correlated with severe consequences for child development, including mental health (see Fang et al., 2015; Kaplow & Widom, 2007), physical health (see Norman et al., 2012; Springer et al.,

2007), as well as academic functioning (see Romano et al., 2012; Sherr et al., 2016). A systematic review by Norman and colleagues (2012) demonstrated a significant association between child maltreatment and mental disorders, substance use, suicidality, and risk-taking sexual behaviour. Furthermore, according to survey data from the Optimus Study South Africa, Ward and colleagues (2018) found that 18% of adolescents 15 - 17 years old had experienced physical abuse, while about 26% indicated being victims of emotional abuse. Additionally, 1 in 4 South African youths reported multiple victimisation experiences (Meinck et al., 2016).

**2.5.1.3 Compound Socio-demographic Risks.** Compound socio-demographic risks refer to those factors (such as age, race, gender, sexual and gender identity, financial status, and level of education) that transact along the lines of vulnerability. Children may face risk in one or more categories with varying intensity, and at varying times, given the many social ecologies, they transact daily. Some children may experience intense adversity in one domain, leading to a cascading effect of risks in other areas of their lives. For example, one child may suffer the loss of a parent (specific adverse life event), which may necessitate a change in neighbourhood residence which may have higher levels of gangsterism due to loss of income from the deceased parent (challenging social and physical environments).

Of all the threats to children in South Africa, poverty remains one of the most salient to child development (Lake et al., 2019). A UNICEF and Statistics South Africa (2017) study identified seven deprivations that defined multi-dimensional poverty. These include poor health, lack of education, an inadequate standard of living, disempowerment, low-quality economic activity, threats of violence, and living in environmentally hazardous areas. Children living in multi-dimensional poverty, such as those in rural areas where fewer adults are gainfully employed, suffer on

average 4 out of 7 deprivations (UNICEF, 2017). This study used a multiple overlapping deprivation analysis (MODA) and found that 42% of all youths are multidimensionally poor in South Africa, a statistic that rises to around 88% in rural areas. A significant concern is that child poverty rates have increased from 64% to 67% between 2011 and 2015. The Eastern Cape province represented the second-highest child multi-dimensional poverty rate at close to 79%.

The generally accepted view is that poverty threatens all aspects of childhood by depriving children of the capabilities and opportunities needed to survive, develop, and thrive – the effects of which may last into adulthood (Louw & Louw, 2022). According to a developmental study across sub-Saharan countries by Kidman and Palermo (2016), poorer households tend to create stressed parent environments correlated with short-term survival strategies. Parents are often made to migrate for work opportunities, leading to children living in multiple households with inconsistent or absent caregivers. A long-established characteristic of South African childhood is the extent to which parents are absent from children's daily lives (Grinspun, 2016). According to Hall (2020), poor health, unsafe living environments, low access to education, and income poverty are highly correlated because money is required to access multiple services.

According to Hall (2020), over 12 million children in South Africa received a monthly Child Social Grant (CSG) of R440 as of March 2020. These grants are vital to the health and well-being of children in South Africa as they aim to alleviate income poverty and meet children's right to social assistance. Additionally, research has shown that CSGs are correlated with improved nutritional, health, and educational outcomes in youths (see Coetzee, 2013, 2014). Unfortunately, according to research by UNICEF South Africa in collaboration with the Department of Social

Development (2016), exclusion rates for eligible infants under a year were as high as 43% in 2014. Moreover, the total exclusion rate for all ages was 18% (close to 2 million children).

Compound socio-demographic risks such as racism and prejudice have been called the 'cancer of South African society', especially since they may cause severe physical and psychological harm and even death (Louw & Louw, 2022). Racism refers to the belief that humans are divided into separate and unique biological entities called 'races', that there is a causal link between inherited physical traits of a race and traits of personality, intellect, morality, and other behavioural features, and that some races are innately superior to others (Smedley, 2021). Prejudice or discrimination refers to acting out of certain biases and beliefs, such as discriminating against people of other races, gender, and sexual orientation. Inherently, this is abuse (Louw & Louw, 2022).

South Africa has garnered international attention for its prejudicial racial history. The legacy of Apartheid, in which various groups of people were marginalised based on racial lines, continues to affect society today. South Africa remains one of the most unequal countries due, in significant part, to the legacy of racial segregation. Despite the transition to democracy, social discord is maintained by the low quality of connection among citizens of the country and fuels racism, xenophobia, and misogyny whilst threatening the gains of democracy (Mulaudzi, 2022).

South Africa continues to be plagued by race-based politics and gender-based violence as it tries to integrate multiple identities, cultures, and people groups. Even 28 years following the first free and fair democratic elections, the entrenched race and gender inequalities persist, simultaneously making the plight of violence against women and children endemic. Women's most significant challenges are educational

and employment inequality, while teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence hinder their progress. Income inequality continues to be racialised and gender biased (Mulaudzi, 2022). According to Statistics South Africa (2021), female workers earn, on average, some 30% less than their male counterparts, while the average white person is likely to earn three times more than the average black person. Financial inequalities are differentiated by race as some 65% of black children were categorised as poor, while 31% of Coloured and only 3% of white children lived below the poverty line in 2018. This statistic means that the average white child will likely have better access to structural resilience enablers brought about by increased socio-economic advantage.

While overt forms of racism appear to decline, Puttick (2012) stated that racialised patterns which characterised Apartheid continue to affect youth identity in contemporary South Africa. For example, young white people in South Africa appear to present with perceptions of 'extreme whiteness' whilst also perceiving unfair disadvantage due to the State's focus on affirmative action and redistribution, whilst black youths appear to continue to perceive themselves as 'other' compared to the 'normativity of whiteness'.

However, discrimination also occurs within racial lines. Xenophobia has become a significant concern in South Africa with more African immigrants entering the country looking for better opportunities. According to an article in the Mail and Guardian (2021), politicians have added fuel to the fire by using foreign nationals as scapegoats for failure in delivery and redistribution, resulting in violent and deadly outcomes.

Discrimination and sexual identity issues may also cause physical and psychological risks. Adolescence is the developmental stage when most individuals

discover their sexual identity. Sexual identity encompasses sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender roles. Although most people are heterosexual, other forms of sexual orientation, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or asexual orientations, may also occur. Furthermore, most people's gender identity corresponds with their biological sex (i.e., male or female). However, other forms may also occur, such as transgender persons, who believe that their gender identity differs from their biological sex (i.e., that they were born in the wrong body), intersex persons (individuals born with both male and female sexual organs), and persons who are not quite sure of their sexual identities. Although these groups are often lumped together under the acronym LGBTQ+, there are specific needs and concerns related to each identity (see Louw & Louw, 2022). Although commonalities exist in sexual identity development, there are diverse trajectories across individuals and groups (see Hall et al., 2021, for an overview). For example, individuals who identify as any of the sexual minority orientations or gender identities may navigate different tasks and milestones related to their stigmatised sexual or gender identity status. For example, many keep their orientations or identities hidden for fear of discrimination and adverse reactions, which may result in psychological and behavioural problems, such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, substance abuse and suicidal ideation. Alternatively, positive sexual identity experiences such as self-awareness, intra- and interpersonal authenticity, freedom from gender roles, commitment to social justice and connection with the LGBTQ+ community may contribute to psychological well-being and adaptive social functioning (see Riggle et al., 2017)

**2.5.1.4 Biological Vulnerabilities.** Biological vulnerabilities include genetic predisposition, premature birth, early malnutrition, and disability. These vulnerabilities exist at the individual level but still transact with the environment.

A genetic predisposition is an increased likelihood of developing particular biological, physical, mental health or psychological conditions and disorders, or traits based on a person's genetic makeup. Human behaviour is often subject to genetic variations. How individuals differ in their intellectual abilities, personalities, mental health, and susceptibility to various diseases are, to a large extent, functions of genetic predispositions. A genetic predisposition results from specific genetic variations often inherited from a parent and may contribute to developing a disease, disorder, or trait but do not directly cause it. In people with a genetic predisposition, the risk of the condition can depend on multiple factors, such as other genetic factors (sometimes called modifiers) as well as lifestyle and environmental factors (MedlinePlus, 2021). Although a person's genetic makeup cannot be altered, some lifestyle and environmental modifications may be able to reduce the risks.

The World Health Organisation defines premature birth as delivery before 37 weeks. Premature birth is associated with numerous compounding developmental challenges, including communication disorders and delays, respiratory problems, motor impairment, neurodevelopmental problems, compromised feeding skills and maternal bonding difficulties (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2019). Moreover, the leading cause of child mortality under five years is correlated with preterm birth complications (WHO, 2018). According to Ramokolo et al. (2019), the critical maternal factors for premature births include smoking, alcohol and illicit drug use, illegal termination of pregnancy and low socio-economic status. Fifteen percent of children (1 in 7) are born prematurely in South Africa (Witten, 2020).

Biological vulnerabilities such as neurodevelopmental disabilities (NDDs) may also compromise children's functioning. NDDs include common multi-dimensional, interrelated disorders like cerebral palsy (CP), attention deficit hyperactive disorder

(ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), intellectual disability (ID) and specific learning disability (SLD) (Mullin et al., 2013). Children born with NDDs are more likely to experience sensory, coordination and planning, communication, problem-solving, socio-emotional, and behavioural challenges (Yoro et al., 2020). These children tend to experience significant challenges adapting to the demands of their educational environments and may require significantly more educational support (Behrman & Butler, 2007). Sadly however, studies have demonstrated that teachers in South Africa experience difficulties accommodating and supporting such children with barriers to learning (Makoelle, 2016; Phasha et al., 2013).

Malnutrition is the lack of proper nutrition, such as inadequate or unbalanced nutrition (see WHO, 2021). It includes both undernutrition and overnutrition. Undernutrition refers to too little food intake or an imbalance in nutrient intake. Undernutrition continues to be a significant factor in mortality rates of children under the age of five, with 25% of hospital deaths associated with severe acute malnutrition (Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, 2018). Similarly, 27% of children are stunted and unlikely to reach their physical and cognitive developmental potential. May and colleagues (2020) refer to the food and nutrition security of children in South Africa as 'the slow violence of malnutrition'. The authors describe that the issue of malnutrition amongst South African children "reflects a slow, hidden, and cumulative violence against South Africa's children that is in conflict with the country's Bill of Rights and Constitution and is a violation of their rights" (p. 22).

Furthermore, the most recent South African Child Gauge (2020) is dedicated to food and nutrition security. The concept of slow violence is used to illustrate the significant threat of nutrition insecurity to human development that reaches across the lifespan and cascades into generational ill-health and poverty. Of concern is the

UN Food and Agricultural Organization's (FAO) finding that the pandemic may increase malnourishment globally to as many as 132 million people. It is expected that the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession will have a profoundly negative effect on food and nutrition security in South Africa (May et al., 2020). South Africa already has low birth weight (below 2,5kg) rates of 15%, which further predict child malnutrition and mortality rates of 12 deaths per 1 000 live births (Stats SA, 2017).

While undernutrition is a concern in South Africa, overnutrition is also a challenge. According to UNICEF, 13% of children under five years are overweight, while this number climbs to 27% for teenagers aged 15 - 19. The overweight/obesity problem can be attributed to the consumption of high energy-dense foods and low physical activity (Popkin, 2006). According to the World Health Organisation (2017), the diet-related non-communicable diseases associated with over and undernutrition are the double burdens of malnutrition. A recent study in South Africa by Modjadji and Madiba (2019) found a high co-existence of child undernutrition and maternal overnutrition in the same household contexts. The authors attributed this to consuming energy-dense foods leading to obesity among mothers, while at the same time these foods were insufficiently nutrient-dense to provide children with adequate nutrition. Malnutrition (under and over) is correlated with various adverse developmental outcomes for children. Malnutrition in early life is associated with poor cognitive function, impaired senses, weak academic achievement, and behavioural problems (De & Chattopadhyay, 2019).

### ***2.5.2 Resilience Enablers in South African Resilience Studies***

It has been discussed how the faculty to do well despite adversity is termed 'resilience'. Therefore, the processes and resources that enable resilient outcomes

are referred to as 'resilience-enablers' (Theron & Theron, 2010). According to Theron (2017), explanations of resilience enablers are essential for resilience knowledge, policy, and practice. Since resilience comprises multilevel processes through which systems engage under adverse conditions to attain better-than-expected outcomes, understanding those resilience-enabling processes is fundamental (Van Breda, 2018). From a social-ecological approach, this explanation unpacks how resilience stems from an array of systems in the person's social environment (see Cicchetti, 2013; Ungar, 2012). There has been an increase in research aimed at generating insights that can help professionals operationalise knowledge to mobilise youth resilience processes within adverse contexts by identifying enablers of resilience (Van Breda & Theron, 2018).

As discussed previously, Theron and Theron (2010) undertook to systematically review research on resilience among South African youths between 1990 and 2008. This study sought to identify those resilience enablers in the domains of the self, the family, community, and spiritual/culture by analysing 23-peer reviewed journal articles relevant to South African youth resilience. The authors concluded that the cultural and contextual roots of resilience among South African youths were challenging to capture given what the authors described as 'a plurality of cultures and contexts' in the country. This challenge of unearthing the processes and factors of resilience is predicated both on the universal and the specific. Theron and Theron (2010) assert that resilience can be transformed or re-conceptualised in South Africa to help youths by searching for the indigenous. This notion speaks to how resilience is culturally and contextually informed; thus, those resilience-enabling processes are equally contextualised.

As mentioned earlier, Van Breda and Theron (2018) undertook a follow-up study based on Theron and Theron's (2010) review. The researchers focused on the period after 2008 and reviewed articles published in South Africa between 2009 and 2017. The study analysed 61 academic articles that met stringent inclusion criteria. From this content analysis, four categories of resilience enablers in social ecologies emerged: Personal, relational, structural, and spiritual/cultural (see Table 2.5).

**Table 2.5**

*Social-ecological Layers for Resilience-enabling*

Categories of resilience enablers	Examples
a) Personal	Agency, self-regulation, adaptive meaning-making, high self-esteem, commitment to education, dispositional qualities (cheerfulness, altruism).
b) Relational	Affective support, opportunities for growth and development, instrumental support.
c) Structural	Financial well-being, community facilities and services, the school system, community safety.
d) Spiritual/Cultural	Spiritual beliefs, cultural values, cultural practices.

Van Breda & Theron, 2018

**2.5.2.1 Personal Resilience Enablers.** The personal resilience enablers category is divided into three specific resilience-enabling resources and processes based on 47 articles. Agency (reflected in 21 of the studies analysed), adaptive meaning-making (20 studies) and dispositional qualities (19 studies), commitment to education (14 studies), self-regulation (12 studies), high self-esteem (10 studies) and physical characteristics (4 studies).

Agency is described by Haffejee and Theron (2019) as the potential of people to mould their life experiences whilst acting independently. Agency also relates to people's power to enact authority over their fate and influence their social ecologies (Van Breda, 2016). Young people who take action to facilitate problem-solving, display healthy levels of self-care, are goal-directed, and express their emotional needs are more likely to evince better-than-expected outcomes (Van Breda & Theron, 2018).

Adaptive meaning-making involves cognitively transforming potential threats into opportunities and encompasses a sense of hopefulness and positive interpretation of both the present and future. Lastly, dispositional qualities are those characteristics of the individual that include intelligence, gratitude, cheerfulness, morality, humour, responsiveness, altruism, and empathy.

Hage and Pillay (2017) found that the cohort in their study valued education and believed that education represented the key to a successful future. Moreover, Phasha (2010) described how resilient youths aspired toward tertiary education, believing that higher education would secure employment and better well-being. According to Bhana and colleagues (2016), self-regulation emerged as a resilience enabler and correlated with positive mental health outcomes in at-risk youths. In other studies, avoidance of unhealthy negative emotions and self-distraction was evinced to promote well-being (see Singh et al., 2019).

High self-esteem was identified by Woollett and colleagues (2016) as a resilience enabler that helped children acknowledge personal competence and a sense of identity. Finally, physical characteristics such as good health and physical strength were also seen as assets for fostering resilience (Hills et al., 2021).

**2.5.2.2 Relational Resilience Enablers.** Mhongera and Lombard (2020) maintain that relationships with significant others are fundamental to children's healthy psycho-social development. Relational resilience enablers are categorised by Van Breda and Theron (2018) into three domains identified across 46 articles. These domains include affective support (32 studies), opportunities for growth and development (23 studies), and instrumental support (8 studies).

Affective support refers to the individual's experience of acceptance and care (Van Breda & Dickens, 2017). Moreover, affective support involves a sense of belonging and of being valued. Research has indicated that when individuals at risk perceive that they are valued and belong, they evince positive outcomes (see Collishaw et al., 2016; Ebersöhn et al., 2017). Theron (2016) found that a cohort of adolescents in her study preferred family-like connections to compassionate friends and peers. Moreover, these adolescents also saw caring adults as social parents because of how these adults provided experiences of belonging and mattering.

Additionally, when youths facing adversity can identify and engage with opportunities for growth and development, Goliath and Pretorius (2016) report that these individuals can safeguard themselves from threats. Communication of high expectations, transference of cultural values and heritage, and shared play and humour are also processes by which relational resilience is fostered through opportunities for growth and development (see Bhana et al., 2016; Hage & Pillay, 2017).

Van Breda and Theron (2018) describe instrumental supports as those tangible and immediate supports that protect against harm and provide food, security, and shelter. Theron (2017) found that when adults helped facilitate access to resources for adolescents and provided safe conversational spaces, the adolescents evinced

more resilient outcomes and increased engagement in the community's life (e.g., assisting with babysitting younger children and carrying water).

**2.5.2.3 Structural Resilience Enablers.** Structural resilience enablers are divided into four domains. These domains include financial well-being (13 studies), community facilities and services (10 studies), community safety (10 studies), and the school system (8 studies).

Research indicates that food security, fewer members residing in the household, availability of material resources and access to poverty alleviation mechanisms are some of the factors of financial well-being that protect against threats (see Kumpulainen et al., 2016, Van Breda & Dickens, 2017). Financial security aids in the day-to-day expenditure supporting children's basic nutritional, education, and transport needs.

Van Breda (2017) outlined the importance of community services that include social services and organisations, access to therapeutic supports as well as the presence of NGOs. Moreover, Mosavel and colleagues (2015) described how community activities and gatherings fostered resilience among at-risk youths through community connectedness, hope and altruism. Similarly, community safety, regulation (laws) and the availability of safe spaces within the community are additional protective mechanisms for youth facing adversity (Scorgie et al., 2017).

Lastly, school ecologies are vital for facilitating resilience among adolescents (Hall & Theron, 2016). According to Liebenberg and colleagues (2016), when schools respect children's rights, diversity and agency whilst promoting social justice, children are more likely to have positive outcomes. Schools that set high expectations for learners, limit bullying, and offer learner support and protection against adversity (Mampane & Bouwer, 2011).

**2.5.2.4 Spiritual/Cultural Resilience Enablers.** Spiritual/cultural resilience enablers represented the fewest resilience enablers identified in Van Breda and Theron's systematic review reported in 21 61 studies. Spiritual beliefs were represented in 14 studies, cultural values in 8, and cultural practices in 2. According to Manning and colleagues (2019), spiritual resilience encompasses one's capacity to maintain a sense of self and purpose. This process is embodied through the beliefs, values and principles underpinning one's internal and external resources in the context of adversity.

Studies have shown a complex and dynamic relationship between spirituality and resilience (see Tuck & Anderson, 2014). Smite and colleagues (2015) assert that the spiritual element in resilience is highly correlated with ensuring meaning and purpose in life. Moreover, the authors argue that the spiritual aspect of resilience emphasises the complex and multi-dimensional characteristics of resilience. Manning and colleagues (2019) found that spirituality is a tool that promotes and maintains resilience in later life. Faigin and Pargament (2011) argue that alignment with spirituality affords people comfort, solace, and hope of recovery in trying times. Van Breda and Theron (2018) assert that spiritual beliefs bring comfort, promise protection, offer guidance, and promote connectedness. The values of interdependence and reciprocity (known as *Ubuntu*) are culturally socialised in children living in Africa (Theron, 2019). This statement agrees with Nsamenang's (2006) assertion that African children are socialised to value connectedness to social ecology. Motsamai (2017) found that it is part of African adolescents to valorise connectedness and the advantages this reciprocation brings.

According to Van Breda (2019), only a fraction of the broad literature on resilience research reflects the cultural aspects of resilience. This paucity may be surprising

given the multicultural demographic milieu of the country and its history of racially and culturally divided policies. Only 34% of Van Breda and Theron's review highlighted spiritual and cultural enablers of resilience, of which a mere 16% were culturally specific. Van Breda (2019) argues that one reason for the challenges associated with researching culture and resilience lies in the conflation of culture and race. However, some South African researchers have identified stoicism as a cultural resilience enabler across various contexts (Theron & Malindi, 2010).

Similarly, a cultural value of 'acceptance' has been identified by Theron and Theron (2011), which they termed 'equanimity' – defined as “acceptance for the interim coupled with dreams of a better future” p. 9). Transactions between the child and the social ecology involve the tactful negotiation of well-being promoting resources while the social ecology, in turn, provides support in culturally-defined ways. According to Theron (2019), it is of little surprise that a shared social ecology in South Africa involves the connectedness of adolescents with a collective of adults and peers.

Of the 61 studies, Van Breda and Theron (2018) analysed, only four reliably associated resilience and South African youths' ability to navigate and negotiate resources. Personal and relational enablers of resilience were prominent compared to structural and spiritual/cultural enablers of resilience, which were few.

According to Van Rensburg and colleagues (2018), it is of great importance in the South African context for professionals, service providers and community members who serve the youth to organise unique context-specific, resilience intervention programmes that are informed by culturally and contextually appropriate social-ecological supports.

Support should be both meaningful and reachable for youths. It was further found that when culturally and contextually relevant resources were made available to youths, they were more likely to evince resilient processes and outcomes. Van Rensburg and colleagues maintain that this relevance-dependence has to do with youths being more likely to use meaningful resources with the socio-cultural values they have been socialised to respect and endorse.

## **2.6. Academic Resilience**

Academic resilience has been defined in several ways; some researchers define it in terms of motivation (Alfaro et al., 2006) or reading proficiency (Cappella & Weinstein, 2001); others, as academic self-efficacy (Schwienle & Mims, 2009), or the ability to deal with academic pressure and setbacks (Martin, 2002). Nevertheless, for most researchers, academic resilience is operationalised in academic achievement (Martin, 2013; Meinert, 2013; Morales, 2014). There is a shared understanding among researchers that academic resilience refers to achievement in school despite adversity. Martin (2013) describes academic resilience as "a capacity to overcome acute or chronic adversity that is seen as a major threat to a student's educational development" (p. 488). Similarly, Masten and Obradovic (2008) consider academic resilience as reaching achievement levels above what is expected for a specific at-risk group. However, the authors also maintain that academic resilience can mean returning to normal achievement levels in the face of adversity.

Academic resilience has been internationally examined in various studies across various disciplines (Bernard, 1991; Masten, 1994; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992). It is often synonymous with educational resilience since both constructs chiefly advocate learner achievement within an educational context, despite adversity (see Banatao, 2011; Plunkett et al., 2008) and are therefore readily used

interchangeably. Research indicates that academic achievement and success in school pave the way to future individual achievement and economic security (Benatao, 2011; Fallon, 2010). Given the importance of achieving academically, there is a central role in understanding and fostering academic resilience to promote better outcomes for young people in South Africa. Moreover, according to Liebenberg and colleagues (2016), school environments are the only formal source of service provision for children living in marginalised communities.

Empirical studies spanning decades have indicated that socioeconomically disadvantaged learners are more likely to have lower learning outcomes due to poor academic performances when compared to their more advantaged peers (Martin & Marsh, 2006). Agasiti and colleagues (2018) identified poverty as the most salient factor in academic adversity. However, as discussed previously, risk factors go beyond compound socio-demographic factors. As Van Rensburg and colleagues (2015) outlined, learners also face threats to development through biological vulnerabilities, specific adverse life events, and challenging social and physical environments – which are not necessarily economically driven. Schools have been shown to play essential roles in fostering resilience in vulnerable children and mitigating the effects of contextual risks on the developmental outcomes of learners (see Theron & Donald, 2013; Theron et al., 2014). Frawley and colleagues (2014) maintain that schools can afford vulnerable children a safe and welcoming environment from risks in their homes and communities. In this way, schools have the potential to offer resources (material and relational) to learners for whom these resources may not be available across their other environmental contexts.

According to Shepherd (2016), the context for studying academic resilience in South Africa is dissimilar from other countries, given the relationship between the

child's schooling and home environment. Low socio-economic status homes predict approximately 60% of poor academic performance for children from these under-resourced home environments. While poverty is common adversity that influences academic achievement, some children can achieve when others do not despite the multi-faceted threats entwined with poverty that exemplifies academic resilience as a salient psychological construct (Gizir, 2004).

The understanding of academic resilience followed much the same trajectory as typical resilience research. Studies initially focused on classifying at-risk learners and threats to low academic achievement in the same way early resilience research concerned with pathology-focused enquiry and identifying at-risk individuals. However, while resilience research has moved on to a more dynamic process of understanding ways in which learners transact reciprocally with their social ecologies (and the resources therein), the majority of academic resilience research appears to be concerned with a quantitative outcome approach that prioritises the identification of protective and risk factors (Kutlu et al., 2016). Here, protective factors and risk factors are delineated into external and internal forces, the combination of which increases or decreases the odds of academic achievement. Protective factors are championed whilst efforts are made to mitigate risk factors. For example, the Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30) by Cassidy (2016) provides a quantitative measure of academic resilience predicated on the individual's adaptive, cognitive-affective, and behavioural responses to academic adversity.

Ultimately, the emphasis on most studies into academic resilience is concerned with identifying factors that play a role in academic achievement and resilience rather than on how these children navigate and negotiate for resources in their social ecologies. Moreover, Kutlu and colleagues (2016) assert that descriptive and

qualitative research into academic resilience is scant and more studies that describe academic resilience processes are needed in the field. Two key contributors to the South African academic resilience literature are Heleen Hofmeyer (2019) and Gabrielle Willis (2018). However, both authors use quantitative measures in their research. According to a database search in November 2020, there were no multiple case study research papers on academic resilience, including South African adolescents (EBSCOhost). Five qualitative studies were found though these studies were either aimed at different developmental stages, such as university students (see Das-Brailsford, 2005) or used different data collection strategies (see Mampane, 2014; Mampane & Bouwer, 2006, 2011). A recent study by Van Breda (2022) examined the academic resilience of vulnerable primary school-age children.

As with most outcomes-based evaluations of resilience, academic achievement is contextually sensitive given that it is based on the evaluations of an outside observer and hardly considers the context of at-risk children who may not be accustomed to living in an academically orientated world. However, academic achievement within a resilience framework does not necessitate high grades but, rather, grades that are higher than expected given the intense adversity to which children are exposed (Morales, 2014). In this way, academic resilience is contextually congruent, given that academic achievement is viewed in relationship to the experienced adversity. For example, a learner achieving an aggregate of 50% (pass) in an environment laden with high risks can be seen as academically resilient since academic achievement has occurred despite an expectation that the child is unlikely to succeed. The question remains about how these learners achieve good academic outcomes despite significant adversity.

Schools do not exist in isolation. It is important to acknowledge that community and family risks can significantly affect academic achievement, learners' academic expectations, and general capacity to function at school (Goeke-Morey et al., 2013). According to Van Rensburg and colleagues (2019, p. 2), “resilience demands constructive, bidirectional transactions between young people and their life worlds”. It is, therefore, fundamental to take cognisance of the many and varied social ecologies in which children live, develop, navigate, and transact daily, as well as those processes of negotiation for resources that produce academic achievement in the face of adversity. According to Ungar (2018), social ecologies are co-responsible for adolescents' positive adjustment as they support individuals in accessing culturally and contextually meaningful opportunities and resources that reciprocate negotiations for support. Therefore, resilience is a collaborative adolescent-environment process (Ungar, 2012).

## **2.7 Social Ecology Theory of Resilience**

Early research on resilience overlooked cultural factors contributing to positive adjustment despite adversity (Wright & Masten, 2015). According to these authors, this has changed significantly recently as studies in the domain have grown. Moreover, the increased awareness of how complex environments transact to promote positive adaptation across culturally diverse contexts has seen an increase in South African resilience studies as well (see Malindi, 2014; Theron & Theron, 2013; Theron & Rothman, 2015). Ungar's (2011, 2012, 2015) Social Ecology Resilience Theory (SERT) significantly contributed to understanding the role of culture and context in resilience processes.

The social-ecology resilience perspective focuses on how an individual interacts with and adapts to the physical and social aspects of their environments in the face

of adversity. According to Ungar (2011), from this perspective, resilience is recognised through the investigation and analysis of the broader socio-ecological environment within unique cultural contexts. As discussed, the early definitions of resilience were defined simplistically through individual-focused factors such as individual traits or personality characteristics. Ungar (2012) argued that this underestimated the complexity of resilience processes and the effects of social ecologies on resilience processes. In accordance, Masten (2014) opined that resilience needs to be conceptualised as a transactional construct between the person and the environment. Van Breda and Dickens (2017) agree that person-in-environment approaches substantiate resilience processes in the transactions between people and their social environments. Therefore, the person and the social ecology play active roles in expediting positive outcomes.

The term "social ecology" reflects the study of how people or organisms co-exist and transact with their environments (Stokols et al., 2013). The role of social ecology is to provide resilience-enabling resources to the person, while the person's role is to navigate toward the resources in the social environment (Haffejee & Theron, 2019). Therefore, this functions as a reciprocal process: The social ecology fosters positive adaptation by affording the person resources to support functional behaviours, while person-driven transactions involve individuals adjusting toward, bargaining for, or requesting support from their social ecologies, necessary to respond positively to adversities (see Ungar, 2015; Van Rensburg et al., 2018).

Ungar (2011) maintained that the importance and quality of social-ecological supports offered to children at risk in their social ecologies needed to be the focus of resilience research. Additionally, how these children find and utilise these resources to beat the odds remains a salient area of enquiry (see Haffejee & Theron, 2019;

Van Breda & Theron, 2018). Consequently, according to Van Rensburg and colleagues (2018), the collaboration between at-risk individuals and their social ecologies to achieve better-than-expected/functional outcomes presents the most meaningful conceptualisation of the resilience process.

Resilience from a Social Ecology Resilience Theory (SERT) perspective unfolds through three processes, according to Haffejee (2018); these include the nature of the individual's context, the interaction between the person and their environment, and the individual's unique capacities. Similarly, Ungar maintains that:

Where there is potential for exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that build and sustain their well-being and their individual and collective capacity to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways.

(p. 17)

Van Rensburg and colleagues (2018) describe the social-ecological perspective of resilience as "the understanding of resilience as a process in which social ecologies and individuals collaborate in contextually and culturally relevant ways to achieve functional outcomes in the face of adversity" (p. 4). This emphasis on the cultural relevance of support and the unique relationship of engagement between person and ecology is key to understanding the processes of resilience building in the South African context. This is because South Africa is a heterogeneous society with divergent cultures, languages, and economic diversity.

Ungar (2012) put forward four fundamental principles to facilitate understanding the social-ecological theory of resilience (SERT): Decentrality, complexity, atypicality and cultural relativity. The principle of decentrality speaks to the focus placed on the

ecologies within which the child develops and the extent to which those ecologies facilitate resilience rather than being preoccupied with individual traits. This focus advocates that resilience is not simply a consequence of the individual's agency, competencies, and characteristics in negotiating adverse life conditions. Those social ecologies are also responsible for responding to and supporting at-risk individuals (Van Rensburg et al., 2018).

The principle of complexity refers to the likelihood of a better-than-expected outcome being influenced by the degree of threat posed by a changing environment. Resilience is a complex process of interplay rather than a cause-effect relationship that assumes to presume outcomes based on universal factors and processes. Furthermore, individuals might follow typical or atypical pathways. According to Ungar (2012), the salient focus is the functionality of how individuals behave in adversity instead of having preconceived ideas or prescriptions of which pathways are more likely to lead to resilience.

The third principle of SERT considers resilience as a dynamic process rather than a static one. The resilience process is thus changeable and alters across different contexts. The process is influenced by various factors such as the available resources, the exposure to varying contexts, and types of relationships, which ultimately play a role in how individuals reciprocate with their social ecologies.

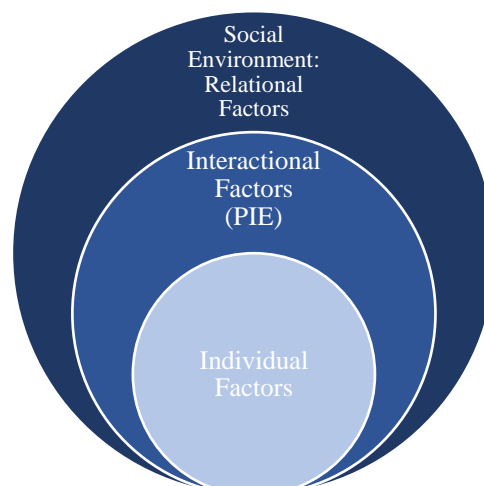
Lastly, culture appraises the resilience process and forms the lens through which individuals find meaningfulness in resources (Panter-Brick, 2015). This 'meaningfulness' can differ between cultures. To one, community support may play a more significant role as a protective factor (i.e., *Ubuntu* in black South Africans), whilst a supportive individual (i.e., supportive teacher or parent) may be more meaningful to one with more Western culture.

From these principles, Ungar (2012) explicated that resilience is neither intrapsychic nor personal strengths nor personal processes; instead, it is located in the reciprocation between individuals and their social environments. As Haffejee and Theron (2017) contend, "these principles emphasise contextual factors as antecedents of positive adaptation; resilience is considered a culturally embedded, dynamic process that is subject to change across time and dependent on context" (p. 89).

The meaning that individuals attach to available resources is influenced by culture and context and therefore affects the value attributable to divergent expressions of resilience (Jefferis, 2016). The social ecology of resilience theory thus focuses on resilience as the aptitudes of people to locate, navigate and negotiate for resources in their social environments. Van Breda (2017) agreed that resilience is found in the interface between individuals and their environments, referred to as the PIE (person-in-environment). This transaction is demonstrated in a visual model for the social ecology theory of resilience in Van Breda's (2017) Youth Ecological-Resilience Scale (see Figure 2.6)

### Figure 2.6

#### *Person-in-environment Framework*



Van Breda, 2017

The smaller, central circle consists of individual factors attributable to the 'person' in the PIE, such as distress tolerance, high self-expectations, optimism, self-esteem, spirituality, and locus of control – personal constructs that have been shown to organise their adaptation to the demands of the experienced adversity (Van Breda, 2017). This dynamic is synonymous with Van Breda and Theron's (2018) 'personal' resilience enabling factors. The social environment is represented in the outer circle as 'E'. Van Breda maintains that these factors are separated into *relational* (e.g., relationships with friends, family, community, teachers, role models, and lovers) and *social* and environmental factors (e.g., family financial security, community safety, and social activities). The sphere between the environment (E) and the person (P) is the transaction domain of the PIE regarding the person-*in*-environment. This reciprocation is the area of navigation and negotiation, as referred to by Ungar (2012) and speaks to the individual's ability to identify and mobilise resources through engaging with and influencing the environment. This particular area of the resilience process is yet to be studied in the South African context and is the salient area of focus for this research.

A social ecologies approach to sub-Saharan adolescent resilience studies is favoured among authoritative scholars in the field of resilience research (Rutter, 2012; Van Breda & Theron, 2018). For example, there is a good fit between the traditional African valuing of interdependence and reciprocity of *Ubuntu* which, according to Theron and Phasa (2015), involves a philosophical favouring of humanness and personhood. Theron (2018) maintains that studies have shown that

African children are socialised into connectedness to a social ecology (see Motsami, 2017; Ramphele, 2012) because they value the benefits of reciprocal connectedness. For these reasons, the social ecology resilience framework presents a good fit for the current research on the academic resilience of children who overcome adversity.

## **2.8 Conclusion and Summary**

In conclusion, the conceptualisation and operationalisation of resilience as a concept for research and practice have undergone many changes over the decades. This process has seen resilience evolve from a person-focused construct to a process-orientated phenomenon. The interest of scholars remains in investigating how some children evince positive outcomes despite adversity and how these children navigate and negotiate for resources to foster resilience-enabling processes and outcomes. The educational environment is one salient environment that requires continuous advancement and increases the odds of other positive outcomes in adult life. Here, children experiencing risks – be they challenging social and physical environments, specific adverse life events, compound socio-demographic, biological vulnerabilities, or a combination thereof – continue to meet the demands of the system, which for so many children in South Africa presents as an obstacle too significant to overcome.

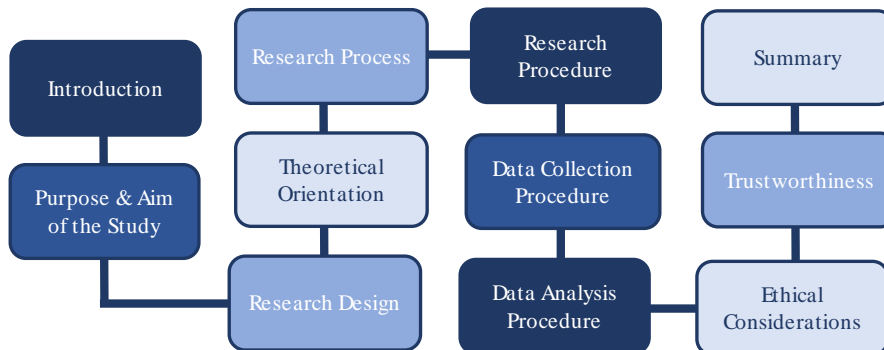
The definition of resilience adopted by Van Rensburg and colleagues (2018) will serve as a point of departure for this study, namely: "Resilience is a process in which social ecologies and individuals collaborate in contextually and culturally relevant ways to achieve functional outcomes in the face of adversity" (p. 4).

Therefore, this research aims to uncover how at-risk children negotiate for resources in their ecologies, navigate their various ecologies, and engage with their

personal, social, structural, and cultural/spiritual contexts to develop academic resilience.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY



### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter delineates the research methodology and design of the current study. The purpose and aim of the study are initially introduced before the methodology that guides the research process is unpacked. Additionally, the theoretical orientation, which provides the lens through which the study is conceptualised, is delineated. After that, the data collection and data analysis procedures are described, followed by the ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the research.

### 3.2 Purpose and Aim of the Study

From the perusal of the extant literature, it has become clear that the educational context presents as one of the most salient ecologies in children's lives, while many children in South Africa are hampered by various adversities that could affect their academic outcomes. The current research focuses on how these learners identify and negotiate for resources to overcome the adversities typically associated with academic demise. The nature of the enquiry is the overarching question of 'how' these learners facilitate their academic resilience processes.

The present study aimed to uncover how children overcame the odds to achieve academically despite the lived experiences of significant adversity. By taking the various waves of resilience research into account and identifying the particular gaps in research, I decided that the best route for this particular study is a social ecology perspective. This perspective grounded the propositions of the study and guided the research questions. Therefore, the central research questions are:

- i. How do at-risk learners navigate their various ecologies to achieve better-than-expected academic outcomes?
- ii. How do at-risk learners negotiate for resources in their ecologies to assist them in their academic careers?
- iii. How do at-risk learners engage with their personal, social, structural, cultural, and spiritual contexts to develop academic resilience?

### **3.3 Research Design**

The research design is the guide by which the researcher endeavours to address the research questions of the study. It provides a framework for how the researcher aims to implement data collecting, sampling, and analysis procedures throughout the study. Many types of research designs are available to the researcher. However, the main designs involve quantitative or qualitative approaches.

A rigorous process of weighing various research options was undertaken to decide on an appropriate research design to answer the research questions. The researcher's guideline for this procedure was Toomela's (2010a) contention that four principal questions should be asked by every scientist when conducting research: (a) What do I want to know? (b) Why do I want to have an answer to this question? (c) With what specific research procedure can I answer my question? (d) Are the answers to the three first questions complementary? Do they make a coherent

theoretically whole? Scrutiny of my research questions revealed that I was more interested in the processual aspects than the structural issues of children's resilience; therefore, a qualitative research design was more appropriate than a quantitative design. In addition, guided by Yin's (2018) contention, the more one's questions seek to explore, describe, or explain some current circumstance (e.g., "how" or "why" some phenomenon works), the more a case study research design becomes relevant. Therefore, a qualitative research design and, more specifically, a multiple-case study research design was chosen. These concepts are explored and argued in the following section.

### **3.3.1 *Qualitative Research Design***

For many decades the preferred method of scientific enquiry was the quantitative method (Cousineau, 2005). The quantitative method is often used to standardise data collection and generalise findings. Its advantages lie in the fact that replication of the study is possible, results can be directly compared, large samples can be used, causal relationships between variables can be tested, predictions can be made, and hypotheses can be tested (Creswell, 2012). One reason for the preoccupation with quantitative approaches in psychology probably dates back to the nineteenth-century movement in the social sciences toward a 'single philosophy of science'. Contributors like Sigmund Freud undertook to "furnish a psychology that shall be a natural science: that is, to represent psychical processes as quantitatively determinate states of specifiable material particles, thus making those processes perspicuous and free from contradiction" (Freud, 1895 [1950], p. 295). This notion means that a systematic methodology based on evidence should be followed in pursuing knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world. This idea most probably follows the dictum of the so-called "hard sciences" initiated by

Descartes in the study of optics, followed by Galileo in the study of motion, eventually yielding, among others, Einstein's relativity theory and Planck's quantum theory. However, these hard sciences were not *born* hard sciences: a developmental scheme was involved, progressing from qualitative to quantitative, or as Kuhn (1996) conjectures, from a pre-scientific to a scientific stage. However, as these sciences mutated, more tools were either imported from other fields (e.g., physics borrowed from mathematics) or had to be developed or created. Paradoxically, as a science evolves towards a hard science scheme, fewer scientists are probing the object of their discipline, as the development of tools, techniques, and measures requires increasingly more effort (see Cousineau, 2005).

This evolving scheme is also witnessed in psychology. For example, Vico's (1752) principle of *verum ipsum factum* reflected that people could only logically report the truth they make (Luft, 2021). The oft-recognised founding father of psychology, Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920), who established the first psychology laboratory in Leipzig, Germany in 1879 used observation and introspection in conjunction with 'objective' measures and various recording devices as means of studying mental activities, such as reaction time. Although Wundt influenced the development of experimental psychology, as in the case of natural sciences many highly influential psychologists developed their theories based on observations and their own experiences. Many aspects of these theories could later be verified by empirical research. Although Freud was instrumental in identifying psychology as a science, the scientific evidence for his approach is limited. He tended to develop many ideas, which gave the impression that he theorised first and then attempted to produce data to fit (McLeod, 2018). He believed in the qualitative difference between people, primarily studied himself and his patients and was criticised because his views of

child development were based on adults recalling the past. His theories are highly unfalsifiable, meaning they can neither be proven nor refuted (see McLeod, 2018). However, he stimulated debate and research that led to adaptations of his theories by his followers.

With the advent of more scientific rigour, procedures and methods were designed; among them quantifiable psychological tests and questionnaires, methods to analyse data, and various statistical techniques. These procedures and methods were applied to many domains of psychology. In fact, during most of the previous century, statistical methods to quantify data became indispensable tools for hypothesis testing. Instead of looking for a theory that can be elaborated with the help of statistical tools, statistical tools began to determine the shape of theories Toomela (2010b). Lamiell (2019) and Valsiner (2012) contend that the classification of sciences (i.e., 'hard' or 'soft' science) by the degree to which they can implement the 'scientific method' reflects the method-centrism that had taken hold of psychology over the last century. This process occurred when the craftsmanship of statistical analysis became psychologists' dominant activity. This occurrence implies that the development of increasingly more sophisticated tools for statistical analysis and rating scales enabling the generation of quantitative data misled psychologists to adapt their study phenomena and research questions to their methods rather than vice versa.

However, according to Uher (2021), methods are just a means to an end. The author describes that sciences should be phenomenon and problem-centred whilst developing theories and methodologies that fit the exploration of such phenomena and the research problems within the field. Uher reminds us of psychology's exceptional position in science because of its highly heterogeneous field of study

covering all areas of human life. Some examples are individuals' sensations and perceptions of physical phenomena (e.g., psychophysics, environmental psychology); biological and pathological phenomena associated with experience and behaviour (e.g., biological psychology, neuropsychology, clinical psychology); individuals' experience and behaviour concerning others in society (e.g., social psychology, personality psychology, cultural psychology, psycholinguistics); developments and events in the different stages of life (e.g., developmental psychology, educational psychology, occupational psychology). Uher contends that no other science explores such a diversity of study phenomena. Psychology requires a plurality of epistemologies, methodologies, and methods, which include experimental and technology-based investigations (e.g., neuroimaging, video-analyses), interpretive and social-science investigations (e.g., of texts, narratives, multi-media); as well as investigations involving self-report and self-observation (e.g., interviews, questionnaires, guided introspection).

Interestingly, the founding father of psychology, Wilhelm Wundt (1896, cited in Kim, 2016), highlighted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that every concrete experience always has two aspects – the objective content given and individuals' subjective apprehension of it. The natural sciences tend to explore objective content. They develop theories, approaches, and technologies that help minimise the involvement of human perceptual and conceptual abilities in research processes and filter out their effects on research outcomes. Psychology, in turn, often deals with the entire experience in its immediate subjective reality.

From this exposition, one could surmise that quantitative approaches are often inadequate for explaining complex issues. Examples are the following (see McLeod, 2019): Using precise and restrictive operational definitions may inadequately

represent complex concepts, rendering a superficial picture. Predetermined variables and measurement procedures can mean that other relevant observations are ignored; therefore, the focus of a quantitative procedure may be too narrow. Despite standardised procedures, structural biases can still affect quantitative research – missing data, invalid or imprecise measuring instruments, poor knowledge of the application of statistical techniques or inappropriate sampling methods are all biases that can lead to wrong conclusions. Quantitative methods often lack context; it often uses unnatural settings or fails to consider historical and cultural contexts that may affect data collection and results. Adding to the above, Spiegelberg and Biemel (2017) maintain that using experimental psychology to identify a foundation for the human sciences is unfeasible. The authors describe that this challenge involves the inherent difficulty in understanding what is at stake in knowledge, as in the natural sciences.

O'Neil and Koekemoer (2016) argue that qualitative research offers the opportunity to highlight the complexity of social phenomena whilst giving a voice to people in marginalised contexts. This capacity to uncover complexity is because qualitative researchers work from the perspective that social reality is a human creation based on making sense of peoples' beliefs and practices to contextualise meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). According to Baškarada (2014), a qualitative enquiry seeks to understand the nature of the research problem instead of focusing on the number of observed characteristics. The overarching aim of qualitative research is to explore and comprehend social phenomena in natural contexts (Teherani et al., 2015). Silverman (2020) asserts that qualitative research has three fundamental tenets: It seeks to understand human experience, considers interviews, and focus groups as affording direct access to the individual's subjective

perceptions, and values the importance of the empathic competencies of the researcher to achieve meaningful findings. Biggerstaff (2012) unpacks the nature of qualitative research as accepting the idea of intersubjectivity wherein humans create meaning to the shared interpretation of the world they inhabit.

Moreover, qualitative research does not typically utilise statistical procedures or other means of quantification as one would use to test hypotheses and statistical generalisation (Jackson, 2008). Therefore, the qualitative researcher's role is to make sense of social phenomena and the meanings individuals ascribe to them. According to Biggerstaff (2012), the qualitative researcher is very much involved in the research process and reflects on their influence and experience in the research process. The author maintains that this position taken by the researcher is not objective as the researcher attempts to comprehend the world from the participant's perspective. This process differs from quantitative research because it does not follow hypothesis testing (i.e., a top-down approach). Instead, hypotheses emerge as the research problem and question are refined (i.e., bottom-up approach).

However, these issues and the techniques and methods used in qualitative research have led to criticism of this research methodology. For example, issues of researcher bias are usually raised. At the same time, the trustworthiness of qualitative findings has been questioned due to the non-standardised methods (unstructured or semi-structured interview methods, videos, artefacts) associated with the paradigm. In general, qualitative research is regarded as less robust than quantitative research. These issues remain some of the main reasons hindering academic consistency in the academic review process when qualitative research is to be published (Levitt et al., 2017).

Willig and Rogers (2017) argue that the views on qualitative research began to change in the 1970s following the emancipatory movements of the 1960s. For example, feminist psychology questioned the objectivity of quantitative approaches that deemed women intellectually inferior to men (see Gergen, 1973). A significant turning point in psychological research can be traced to Henrique and colleagues' (2002) *Changing the Subject*, which criticised the mainstream psychology of the day and emphasised the value of language and interpretation within psychological research. Therefore, a more accepting attitude towards quantitative research gradually developed. In addition, according to Demuth (2015), there has been an upsurge in mainstream journal publications favouring qualitative approaches in psychological research, while Willig and Stainton Rogers (2017) assert that qualitative psychology research has traversed from the margins to the mainstream within psychology.

As pointed out in Chapter 2, various South African researchers called for more qualitative research in resilience studies, firstly because the psychometric properties of psychological measures used in many quantitative studies are not necessarily valid for all population groups and secondly because quantitative procedures cannot uncover the complexity of the phenomenon.

A qualitative orientation fits the current study as it seeks to understand and describe the contextually specific processes to explore children's academic resilience in adversity. Moreover, the approach offers the opportunity to unpack richer, thicker descriptions of phenomena that may have gone unnoticed in different contexts. In this way, the current research can uncover unidentified resilience processes whilst elevating the voices of individuals in contextually specific ecologies (Ungar, 2012). Theron (2012) also emphasises the importance of research

prioritising youths' voices in developing contexts as it adds to the definition and conceptualisation of local resilience.

### **3.3.2 Case Study Research Design**

Case studies are one of the first types of research to be used in qualitative research designs. Case study research has been around as long as recorded history, and much of what we know today about the empirical world has been produced by case study research (Flyvbjerg, 2011). In Psychology, influential and well-known psychologists such as Freud, Piaget, and Erikson used the case study approach. However, it has been argued that recent case study research has its roots in qualitative approaches in the disciplines of the social sciences in the early twentieth century when detailed ethnographic studies of individuals and cultures involved this design. In addition, other disciplines such as the natural sciences, medicine, business, law, and politics also applied this method (e.g., Mishra, 2021; Stewart, 2014). Case study research has undergone substantial development in the last 50 years. It has grown in reputation as an effective methodology to investigate and understand complex issues in natural world settings, mainly when human behaviour and social interactions are central to understanding. This resurgence in case study research could be attributed to the development of grounded theory in the 1960s and has been re-established as a credible, valid research design (see Harrison et al., 2017). However, despite their widespread use and popularity, case studies are characterised by ambiguities and inconsistencies, particularly concerning how case study research is defined, described, and applied, their subjects of investigation and methodological, theoretical, and philosophical choices (Verschuren, 2003). These issues are addressed below.

**3.3.2.1 Philosophical Orientation of Case Study Research.** Research, the systematic quest for knowledge, can be considered through different research paradigms. A research paradigm is an all-encompassing system of beliefs, values, and assumptions regarding the nature and execution of research. The paradigm choice reflects divergent conceptualisations of how researchers approach the problem and its solutions. Therefore, it implies a pattern, structure or framework for research and constitutes the researcher's philosophy of science (Park et al., 2020). The philosophical orientation of the researcher guides the way science is conducted through the following core elements: ontology (how reality is viewed), epistemology (how the nature of knowledge is conceived), axiology (the role and values of the research process), methodology (the processes involved in conducting the research), and rigour (criteria for evaluating the quality of the research). The philosophical paradigm, therefore, reflects the researcher's worldview and determines the characteristics of the research. It is fundamental to understanding and developing a research design and executing it accordingly (Bhatta, 2018).

Many research methodologies are aligned with specific philosophical positions that guide the research process (Harrison et al., 2017). For example, the philosophy of qualitative research is interpretive, humanistic, and naturalistic and is characterised by subjectivity (Creswell, 2007). The ontological assumption is that there is no single reality but multiple realities for any phenomenon. On the other hand, the philosophy of quantitative research is that a single tangible reality exists – one that can be identified and measured. Knowledge is obtained objectively using rigorous protocols and control (Park, 2020). According to Harrison and her colleagues, case study research has practical versatility due to its agnostic nature. It is, therefore, not assigned to a fixed ontological, epistemological, or methodological

position. Case studies can be qualitative or quantitative. As Stake (1994) points out, it could be entirely possible that researchers doing case study research are calling it by another name.

According to Levitt (2020), qualitative studies can be viewed from a post-positivist, constructionist, critical, or pragmatic position. Each of these views provides its philosophical position and theoretical orientation. Table 3.1 (Adapted from Saunders et al., 2009, p, 136) provides an overview of these positions.

**Table 3.1**

*Philosophical orientations in case study research*

Theoretical Orientation	Epistemology	Ontology	Axiology	Methodology	Method
Post-positivism	Approximation of reality.	Critical realist. Reality can only be known imperfectly.	Bias is inevitable. Researcher must detect and correct bias.	Methodological pluralism. Qualitative and quantitative methods.	Perspective-taking. Interviews. Questionnaires. Surveys. Observations.
Constructivism	Reality is interpreted.	No single reality or truth. Reality is socially created.	Value-bound. Value-laden. Contextual. Subjective.	Primarily qualitative. Ethnography. Grounded theory. Discourse analysis.	Interviews. Observation. Case study. Narrative. Theme identification.
Pragmatism	The practical meaning of knowledge in a scientific context.	Knowledge is constructed. Reality is the practical consequences of ideas.	Value-driven research. Researcher reflexivity.	Naturalistic. Practical solutions through a range of methods.	Combination of the above. Usability testing. Physical prototyping.
Critical	Knowledge is value-laden and political.	Power relations. Differences in class, race, and gender. Tensions produce it.	Critique. Social justice. Transformative	Action research. Transformative inquiry using both qualitative and quantitative methods.	Ideological review. Open-ended interviews. Journals. Civil action.

Although case study is widespread in research practice (see Rule et al., 2004), it can be technically complex and challenging and is not as prevalent in psychology research. Edwards (2019) recommends that the literature be perused critically and the methodology well documented. A perusal of the literature indicates a tendency of authors/researchers to either ignore the philosophical position of their case study research or the onus is left to the reader to make their deductions. This paucity confuses understanding and presents a quagmire for novice researchers. For example, Robert Yin (2003, 2014, 2018), a seminal case study proponent, does not explicitly articulate his theoretical orientation but does mention that much of the case study research as described in his book (Yin, 20118), *Case study Research and Applications: Design and methods*, "appears to be oriented toward a *realist* perspective, which assumes the existence of a single reality that is independent of any observer" (pdf 47/414). However, he contends that research can also accommodate a *relativist* or *constructivist* perspective wherein varied realities of different meanings of observer-dependent findings are captured. However, the authors interpret Yin's stance as follows: According to Yazan (2015), because of the way Yin approaches case study, Yin demonstrates positivistic leanings in his perspective. Mishra (2021) introduces Yin as a positivist, while Piekkari and Welch (2018) regard his approach to case study as qualitative positivism. Piekkari and colleague contend that Yin provided a much-needed structured process for case study methodology by aiming to make case study research as rigorous as any other quantitative research. In this sense, Brown (2008) views him as a methodologist. Baxter and Jack (2008) consider Yin's approach guided by a constructivist orientation. Bhatta (2018) argues that it is not convincing to consider Yin as a constructivist because of his structured approach. He also argues that it is

challenging to pronounce Yin as fully positivist. Because there are some notions of interpretive methods in his case study approach, Bhatta believes Yin follows a post-positive tradition of research. This perspective also aligns with the view of Harrison et al. (2017), who consider Yin a realist-postpositivist. Harrison and her colleagues base their contention on Yin's structured methodology, and while objectivity is a goal, he also recognises the descriptive and interpretive elements of case study research.

Unlike Yin, who seems to evade indicating his preferred epistemology, two other seminal case study researchers, Robert Stake and Sharan Merriam follow a more constructivist approach and are more explicit about their epistemic stance. Stake (1995, 2006) is explicitly constructivist and holds that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered. According to Harrison et al. (2017), Stake's qualitative approach to case study is closely aligned with a constructivist and interpretivist orientation. These researchers contend that Stake's approach is reinforced with an impetus for discovering contextual meaning and considering experiences. Stake views the role of the researcher as essential in interpreting knowledge. Merriam (1998, 2009) is more closely aligned with Stake than Yin's viewpoint. She maintains that the interaction with social worlds underpins the construction of reality. Moreover, all types of qualitative research are based on this philosophical assumption. Harrison et al. (2017) view Merriam as a pragmatic constructivist as she suggests that researchers should follow structured processes in the analysis, interpretation, and reporting of case study data.

From the above exposition, it becomes clear that researchers must indicate their philosophical and theoretical orientations, especially since confusions create misunderstandings. This uncertainty undermines and constrains the strength of case

study research as an independent research approach and often limits it to complementary roles.

**3.3.2.2. Case Study: Method, Methodology or Research Approach?** It may be surprising that case study research in methodological textbooks was commonplace until the 1950s, before a stark decline between 1950 and 1980 (see Platt, 1992). The author contends that the emergence of participant observation as a data collection method displaced the use of case study methodology by many researchers at the time. Platt asserts that it was not until Yin's (1984) seminal work that case study research was definitively dissociated from the limited perspective of fieldwork techniques. By the 1980s, the three most widely recognised proponents of case study research, Stake (1988), Yin (1984), and Merriam (1988), had positioned case study as a research methodology separate from other approaches. Yin argued that participant observations in fieldwork differed from case study research and that case study was not simply the exploratory stage of another research method. Platt (1992) maintained that the case study was to be understood as "having its logic of design...a strategy to be preferred when circumstances and research problems are appropriate rather than an ideological commitment to be followed whatever the circumstances" (p. 46).

Similarly, Harrison and colleagues contend that since case study research is not committed to one universal ideological position, the onus is on the researcher to acquaint the reader with the philosophical position from which they intend to work. As discussed, this has historically been a shortcoming in case study research as the reader is typically left to decipher and interpret the process. This process can create further confusion when comprehending whether case study research is a methodology, method, or research approach. D. A. de Vaus (in Thomas 2011) stated

that case studies are primarily ignored or conflated with other qualitative approaches in most research literature. This confusion may also be associated with the comparatively lower psychology doctoral research publications output. Case study research is perceived to be subpar compared to other, more standard methodologies since it is argued that it lacks robustness. Moreover, some still understand case study as merely a tool or qualitative data collection strategy (see Rebolj, 2013; Starman, 2013).

Zaidah Zainal (2007) puts forward a different perspective on case study research. She describes case study as a research method (or tool) that can be a substitute for quantitative or qualitative research. Thus, she argues that case study is a stand-alone method for conducting research. While this view appears to agree with the likes of Stake, Merriam, and Yin, it does not appear to distinguish the research method from the methodology. In Kothari's (2004) *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques*, the author delineates methodology from method/techniques. He states that research methods can be considered all those techniques for conducting research and performing research operations. It is distinguishable from research methodology, which Kothari describes as a means to solve a research problem methodically and logically by considering methods used in the study context. This contextual consideration supports better evaluation of the results by the researcher or others.

The debate as to whether case study research constitutes a qualitative research method or qualitative research type can be observed in the differing views of Gerring (2008) and Starman (2013). Gerring's (2007) text, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*, unpacks case study research as a *qualitative method* wherein various approaches, be they quantitative or qualitative, can be integrated. This view of case

study research is echoed by George and Bennet (2005). Conversely, while Starman (2013) agrees that case study research can be both qualitative and quantitative (and even contain a combination of both approaches), it leans more toward a *qualitative research type* than a method. Other authors support this appreciation of case study (see Baxter & Jack, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 2005; and Sturman, 1997). So too, Meriam and Tisdell (2016) describe the case study bounded system as a qualitative research type. However, they purport that case study can be mistakenly interchanged with broad, qualitative research. This confusion is often the case when researchers unfamiliar with case study experience the pressure of labelling their study as simply 'qualitative'.

The authors continue that many case study methodologies have been titled qualitative research. Thus, it could be argued that while case study research may appear less popular than other methodologies in psychology research, it may be simply mislabelled. Starman follows that case study research is more than *just* qualitative research, "it is a ticket that allows us to enter a research field in which we discover the unknown within well-known borders while continually monitoring our own performance; scalability; and our own, as well as general, existing knowledge" (p. 42). So too, Eysenck (1976), in favour of the case study, maintains that there is significant value in exploring individual cases with the hope of learning something new instead of simply proving something.

My contention aligns with Starman's view that case study is a different nature of enquiry that presents the researcher with alternative avenues to uncovering qualitative data.

**3.3.2.3 Defining Case Study Research.** The differences among case study definitions can be attributable to the varied epistemological bases to which various

researchers subscribe. Gerring (2004) stated that the attempts to define case study research have resulted in a 'definitional jumble' as numerous efforts to elucidate the confusion using definitions tended to do the opposite and decrease understanding of the approach. Flyvbjerg (2006) partially agrees with this sentiment but asserts that *if* a definition of case study is needed, it would be best served as a general definition, void of the detailed description. One such definition may be Sturman (1997), who simply puts that "[a] case study is a general term for the exploration of an individual, group or phenomenon" (p. 61). Conversely, Starman (2013) argues that the definition of case study positions it contextually and affords unique characteristics compared to other types of qualitative research.

The *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (2015) provides a detailed description and defines case study as:

An in-depth investigation of a single individual, family, event, or other entity. Multiple types of data (psychological, physiological, biographical, environmental) are assembled, for example, to understand an individual's background, relationships, and behaviour. Although case studies allow for intensive analysis of an issue, they are limited in the extent to which their findings may be generalized. (p. 37)

Robert Yin's (2018) definition of case study research evolved over several decades. It resulted in an all-encompassing two-fold explanation of the scope and features of case study research. He states that case study is, first, an empirical method that explores a modern phenomenon in detail and real-life context. Secondly, case study is most useful when the boundaries and context may be elusive. He argues that first, one conducts a case study because one requires to understand a real-world case while also understanding that it is likely to involve

critical contextual conditions. This first part also guides the researcher to distinguish case study from other modes of inquiry. The second part of the definition arises because phenomena and contexts are not always distinguishable in real-world situations. Therefore, other methodological characteristics become relevant as the features of a case study. Thus, Yin contends that a case study manages the technically unique circumstance involving multiple variables of interest compared to data points. He further maintains that one result may profit from theoretical propositions that guide the design, collection of data, and analysis. In contrast, another result benefits from multiple sources of substantiation in which data is triangulated.

This description agrees with Stoecker's (1991) depiction that case studies are more than simply design features or data collection strategies. Yin's definition suggests that case study research has its own mode of inquiry, design, data collection strategies and specific approaches to data analysis. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe case study as a comprehensive account and analysis of a bounded system. The focus on a bounded system is integral to Merriam's view, which asserts that if the phenomenon to be studied is not intrinsically bounded (finite), then it is not a case. Similarly, Creswell (2013) unpacks a case study as a qualitative enquiry of a bounded system (termed 'case') over time. This investigation occurs through a comprehensive and detailed collection of multiple sources of data followed by the reporting of a case description/explanation and case-based themes.

Simons (2009) emphasised that case study is not a method but a design frame into which several methods could be incorporated. She further critically reviewed various definitions and commonalities of case study to conclude that case study is a

detailed, complex, and unique investigation from multiple perspectives of a specific real-world system.

In his book, *The Art of Case Study Research*, Robert Stake (1995) describes case study research as an investigation of the exactitude and intricacy of a case and its function within critical circumstances. Stake argues from an interpretivist/constructivist qualitative point of view and contends that case studies provide a holistic view of their contexts.

I tend to identify with Simon's definition of case study. Her definition further aligns with the idea of 'uniqueness' as culturally and contextually relevant concerning the SERT framework from which the study is conceptualised.

**3.3.2.4 Types of Case Study Research Designs.** According to Stewart (2014), the symmetry of philosophy and methodology with the research purpose and methods used supports a rigorous research process. Although traditional case study research has not been associated with a formal design, Bhatta (2018) contends that deciding on a type of case study research design can serve as a valuable guideline to strengthen the research. Yin (2014, 2018), Merriam (1998, 2009) and Stake (1995, 2006) are three seminal authors regarded for advocating structured procedures to follow when conducting case study research (Creswell et al., 2007). However, each of these authors approaches the type of case study research design differently, as discussed below:

Yin (2018) argues that case studies can either be a single-case study design or a multiple-case study design, while single and multiple case study designs are variants of the same methodological framework. These designs can either be holistic or embedded. This categorisation results in four types of designs: Type 1: single-case holistic designs; Type 2: single-case embedded designs; Type 3: multiple-case

holistic designs, and Type 4: multiple-case embedded designs. According to Yin (2018), the single-case study is appropriate when the rationale of the study is relevant to either of the following five circumstances: if the phenomenon is a *critical* test of existing theory, is *unusual*, a *common* situation of everyday life, *revelatory*, or *longitudinal*. A multiple-case study is appropriate when the researcher uses more than one case to study. Anywhere between 2 and 10 can be ideal, depending on what the researcher wishes to accomplish. When sub-units (i.e., more than one unit) are involved in either single or multiple case study designs, the resulting design would be *embedded* in nature. When only one unit is involved, the research design is *holistic*.

Stake (1995, 2006) distinguishes three types of cases: Intrinsic, Instrumental, and Collective. According to Stake, the *case* is dominant in an *intrinsic* case study. This notion implies that the case itself is of interest to the researcher. Therefore, the researcher needs to learn about the particular case. In an *instrumental* case study, the *issue* is dominant. Therefore, the researcher aims to understand a general phenomenon in a given situation. In a *collective* case, the assumption is similar to an instrumental case study, but the researcher may use a collection of cases to understand a phenomenon.

Merriam (1998, 2009) suggests three types of case studies: Historical and Observational, Intrinsic and Instrumental, and Multisite Case Studies. *Historical and Observational Cases* involve historical organisational case studies, life histories, and observational case studies. Historical case study research focuses on historical records and interviews within an existing organisation. In life history cases, the researcher focuses on the life of one individual and intensively studies their life by collecting first-person narratives. This type of research is known by different terms

such as biographical case study, portraiture case study, and life story case study. Observational case studies focus on participant observation, interview data and documents. *Intrinsic and Instrumental Cases* correspond with Stake's exposition of these types of cases. *Multisite Cases* are similar to Yin's multiple-case embedded design. According to Merriam, these studies are also known by different terms, including multi-case studies, cross-case studies, collective case studies or comparative case studies.

Merriam (2009) also lists three features of case study research. She suggests that case study research is *particularistic* because they are concerned with specific circumstances or phenomena that might reveal or represent specific particulars about the phenomena. Merriam continues that this specificity of consideration positions case study as highly suitable for real-world problems. Second, case studies are *descriptive*, which indicates that the presentation of the study includes rich descriptions of what is being studied. Merriam (2009) explains that the result of a case study encompasses a comprehensive description of the phenomena that involve multiple interacting variables over time. The final feature is *heuristic*, which implies that case studies illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon. They can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience, or confirm what is known.

According to Harrison and colleagues (2017), despite the variation in the types of case study, there are familiar characteristics to all of them. Much of the commonality between types of case studies can be ascribed to the nature of the research itself, which all three authors agree, is to gain an understanding of phenomena in natural life settings and answer the *how* and *why* questions of research (see Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014). Brown (2008) summarises the influences of each author,

stating that case study research is reinforced by Merriam's pragmatic approach, enlightened by the rigour of Yin, and augmented by Stake's creative interpretation.

The current study aimed to answer the *how* questions regarding the processes by which at-risk children overcame adversity to demonstrate academic resilience. This exploration into the dynamics of how these children identify and use resilience enablers within their social ecologies aligns with an embedded multiple-case study design (see Yin, 2014, 2018).

**3.3.2.5 Common Characteristics/elements of Case Study Research.** Harrison and colleagues (2017) discuss elements of case study research which delineate case study from other forms of research and inform the critical aspects of the research design and execution. These characteristics of case study research are reflected in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2**

*Elements of Case Study Research*

Element	Description
The Case	Object of the case study is identified as the entity of interest or unit of analysis. It can be a programme, individual, group, social situation, organisation, event, phenomenon, or process.
A bounded system	Bounded by time, space, and activity. Encompasses a system of connections. Bounding applies frames to manage contextual variables. Boundaries between the case and context can be blurred.
Studied in context	Studied in its real-life setting or natural environment. Context is significant to understanding the case. Contextual variables include political, economic, social, cultural, historical, and organisational factors.
In-depth study	Chosen for intensive analysis of an issue. Fieldwork is intrinsic to the process of the inquiry. Subjectivity is a consistent thread – it varies in depth and engagement depending on the philosophical orientation of the research, purpose, and methods. Reflexive techniques are pivotal to credibility and the research process.

Selecting the case	Based on the purpose and conditions of the study. Involves decisions about people, settings, events, phenomena, and social processes. Scope: single, within-case, and multiple-case sampling. Broad: captures ordinary, unique, varied, and accessible aspects. Methods: specified criteria, methodical and purposive; replication logic: theoretical or literal replication (Yin, 2014).
Multiple sources of evidence	Multiple sources of evidence for comprehensive depth and breadth of inquiry. Methods of data collection: interviews, observations, focus groups, artefact and document review, questionnaires, and surveys. Methods of analysis: vary and depend on data collection methods and cases; need to be systematic and rigorous. Triangulation is highly valued and commonly employed.
Case study design	Descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, illustrative, and evaluative – single or multiple cases. Embedded (single or multiple) or holistic (single or multiple) (Yin, 2014, 2018). Particularistic, heuristic, and descriptive (Merriam, 1998, 2009). Intrinsic, instrumental, and collective (Stake, 1995, 2006).

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Harrison et al., 2017, p. 13-14

**3.3.2.6 Advantages of Case Study Approach.** Case study research presents both process and outcome benefits. The case study permits researchers to focus their studies within the confines of space and time in a particular case. This process is what Yin (2018, p. 31) refers to as "bounding the case" and what Merriam (1998, p. 27) describes as "fencing in what I am going to study". The case study approach also allows other researchers to apply the principles learned in a case to other cases or situations, leading to transferability. One of the significant advantages of the case study approach is that it allows for research on the context-phenomenon relationship. For example, the current research investigates how academic resilience (phenomenon) is fostered in a population of at-risk adolescents in school (context). Zainal (2007) expounds that case studies not only help to elucidate data in the real-world context but also provide explanations of the intricacies of real-life conditions,

which are unlikely to be supported through more experimental or survey-based enquiries.

Another benefit is that it allows for collecting data from multiple sources, such as interviews, observations, surveys, documents, and other material sources that help the researcher understand the case (Flyvbjerg, 2011). George and Bennett (2005) identified four significant advantages of the case study method it (i) has a solid potential to achieve conceptual validity, (ii) has robust procedures for cultivating new hypotheses, (iii) helps examine hypothesised roles of causal mechanisms in the context of singular cases and (iv) has the potential for addressing causal complexity. Zainal (2007) states that variations in intrinsic, instrumental, and collective approaches to case studies create the possibility for quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

Theory-building is another positive aspect of case study research. Early works by Glaser and Strauss (1967) detailed their comparative method for developing grounded theory. This method involved continuous comparison of data collected and theory. In defining 'theory', Kerlinger's (1979) description is still valid today in that a theory comprises "a set of interrelated constructs (variables), definitions, and propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining natural phenomena" (p. 64).

Notable contributions by Kathleen Eisenhardt (1989) helped consolidate a process of inducting theory through case study. A strength of theory building using case studies is the likelihood of generating novel theories. The theory-building process Eisenhardt described would produce a testable and empirically valid theory. She argued that this was due to the nature of theory building being

centralised on the juxtaposition of contradictory evidence. Moreover, it is in this juxtaposition that creative insights often arise.

**3.3.2.7 Critique of Case Study Approach.** Despite the advantages of case study research, the approach has attracted criticism from the scientific community.

Baškarada (2014) argues that the case study method is poorly understood because scientific rigour can be challenging to exhibit and justify findings given that case study research is made more complex by opposing epistemological positions.

Similarly, Yin (2018) adds that case study research is yet to have well-structured and completely defined protocols, which may confuse less experienced researchers leading them to conflate case study research with other types of qualitative methodologies. Yazan (2015) argues that a consensus on planning and implementation of the case study approach is still under development which hampers the progress of the methodology.

As discussed earlier, the criticism of case study research appears to be predominantly centred around misunderstandings of the process and terminology of case study (see Flyvbjerg, 2006, 2011; Gerring, 2004). According to Flyvbjerg (2011), these misunderstandings refer to the interpretation of the philosophical/theoretical orientations and the reliability and validity of the research methodology. In terms of theory, there is an assumption among researchers that general and theoretical knowledge is superior to practical case knowledge. Moreover, the case study has been criticised for its perceived lack of rigour. According to Baškarada (2014), much of this criticism comes from inexperienced researchers who do not follow an aligned procedure. He opines that oftentimes, the researcher is careless, allowing inadequate evidence or biased perspectives to sway the direction of the findings and conclusions.

Yin (2018) further purports that some researchers tend to conflate the terms (which he calls *the trilogy*) used in case study research. He defines *case(s)* as the unit of inquiry in a case study, while *case studies* are explained as the method of inquiry used. Finally, *case study research* is the mode of inquiry itself. He argues that "clarifying the trilogy and these pairings" (p. 21) could assist in grasping why case study research continues to have a conflicting standing as a research approach.

Moreover, this misunderstanding of terms has consequences on the meaning and purpose of the approach as *case studies* are also used in counselling and clinical psychology practice or as a teaching tool but for a different purpose. While teaching-practice case studies have merit, they can be manipulated for training purposes and do not typically form part of the research literature (Kumpulained et al., 2016). In contrast, research case studies should conform to formal systematic procedures in which findings are associated with unequivocal evidence whilst providing research-based conclusions (Yin, 2018). This process is not often the case in non-research-based case studies. Similarly, Mishra (2020) states that the concurrent incidence of phenomena, theory and context in a case study is essential to reconciling case study research and teaching cases.

Generalisability also remains a contentious point for case study research. It is argued that the small sample size and often single-case exploration provide little basis for scientific generalisation (Zainal, 2007). Yin (2018) contends that case studies are generalisable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. Thus, in case studies the aim is to expand and generalise theories, which Yin calls *analytical generalisation*, and not to extrapolate probabilities, which refers to *statistical generalisation* typically associated with quantitative research.

However, Flyvbjerg (2011) states that case study can be fundamental to scientific development as it is possible to make generalisations predicated on a single case. Moreover, the concept of *holism* dictates that generalisation is possible based on one case study, given the relationships and connections among individual characteristics and processes. Therefore, generalisation is likely through recognising similarities in divergent contexts and understanding changes as they occur (Sturman, 1997).

There is also criticism regarding bias toward verification, wherein there is a preference for the researcher to confirm their preconceived ideas. The argument here is that the subjectivity of the involved researcher can influence how data are interpreted to fit their notions. However, Sturman (1997) stated that the verifiability principle aids in controlling this kind of bias. Moreover, Popper's (2009) falsification test suggests that a hypothesis is scientific when its defender can determine the circumstances under which it can be contested. The falsification test is highly rigorous because if just one of the observations does not fit the proposition, it is considered invalid and either rejected or revised (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Further criticisms involve the apparent validity and reliability issues inherent in case study research due to a lack of standardised methods or tools. Although the tests and measures used to establish the validity and reliability of quantitative research cannot be applied to qualitative research, quantitative researchers aim to design and incorporate methodological strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. For example, Yardley (2017) contends that sensitivity to context, commitment to rigour, coherence and transparency, and impact and importance are essential in establishing validity in qualitative research. Whittemore et al. (2001) consider validation in qualitative research as establishing credibility (Are the results

an accurate interpretation of the participants' meaning?), authenticity (Are the different voices heard?), criticality (Is there a critical appraisal of all aspects of the research? and integrity (Is the investigator self-critical?). Yin (2018), on the other hand, provides practical tactics to establish construct validity, internal validity, external validity, as well as reliability. According to Yin, these tactics should be applied throughout the conduct of a case study. Therefore, the "design work" of case studies may continue beyond the initial design phase. These tactics are presented in Table 3.3.

**Table 3.3**

*Tactics for Establishing Validity and Reliability in Case Studies*

Tests for establishing credibility	Case study tactic
Construct validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use multiple sources of evidence</li> <li>- Have key informants review the draft case study report.</li> </ul>
Internal validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do pattern matching</li> <li>- Do explanation building</li> <li>- Address rival explanations</li> <li>- Use logic models</li> </ul>
External validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use theory in single-case studies</li> <li>- Use replication logic in multiple case studies</li> </ul>
Reliability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use case study protocol</li> <li>- Develop case study database</li> <li>- Maintain a chain of evidence</li> </ul>

Yin, 2018

Previously, the weak documentation of case study research procedures led to external reviewers becoming unconvinced of the reliability. While proponents of case study research acknowledge the challenges in case study reliability, it is not conceded that case study research is unreliable (see Baxter & Jack, 2008; Simons, 2009; Verschuren, 2003). Baxter & Jack (2008) stipulate that through the detailed

and careful documentation of the procedures followed in the case study one can indeed repeat the work. One means of bridging the potential reliability gap is to ensure that procedures are made explicit such that if a researcher in the future were to follow the same well-described processes of the initial researcher undertaking the same study, they should arrive at similar findings and conclusions.

In addition, Piekkari and Welch (2018) indicate that many social scientists implicitly believe that case studies are only appropriate for the exploratory phase of a study. Consequently, surveys and histories are appropriate for the descriptive phase, and experiments are the only way to pursue explanatory or causal inquiries. A common misconception is that the various research methods should be arrayed hierarchically. This hierarchical perspective supports the notion that case study research is merely a preliminary investigation and should not be used to describe phenomena or test propositions (Flyvbjerg, 2011). However, as Zainal (2007) contends, case studies are far from just being only an exploratory method. Some of the best case studies in various disciplines have been descriptive and explanatory (e.g., Cherry, 2022). One caveat, however, is that the boundaries between the modes are not sharp, and although each mode of enquiry has distinct characteristics, there are considerable overlaps between them. Yin (2018) explains that the goal is to avoid gross misfits; therefore, the mode of enquiry should fit the form of the research question(s), the control the researcher has over actual behavioural events, and the degree of focus (i.e., on historical or contemporary issues and events).

### **3.4 Theoretical Orientation**

As discussed elsewhere, the need to align case study research with a compatible philosophical position to guide the research process is imperative, as it guides the

research process. The importance of clearly indicating the researchers' philosophical position has also been mentioned. It has been emphasised that a lack of clarity creates confusion and undermines the strength of case study research. In this section, I will argue my philosophical position based on extant literature and introspection of my research methods for this study.

From the discussion in previous sections of this chapter, it has become clear that the epistemologies of case study researchers are mainly based on a continuum of either realism or constructivism. There are those researchers who, like Stake (1995), advocate for a more constructivist approach. From this perspective, the notion that researchers can both grasp reality and generate it into concepts and categories without distorting it disappoints in sufficiently describing multifaceted and multidimensional reality (Tcytcarev, 2019). This failure, it is argued, is because an individual's perception captures a limited span of reality. On the other side of the spectrum, those more aligned with a realist approach (see Yin, 2018) value the rigour that clear structure in collaboration with the ideals of objectivity and generalisability brings.

However, as mentioned, Harrison et al. (2017) assert that case study has a practical versatility in its agnostic approach. Rosenberg and Yates (2007) argue that this approach is not limited to a rigid ontological, epistemological, or methodological stance. Similarly, Stewart (2014) maintains that the researcher is allowed to select the methodological orientation used in case study due to this philosophical versatility. Furthermore, this versatility does not necessitate one to subscribe to a specific philosophical stance; instead, there is scope for integration.

As mentioned earlier, Sharan Merriam (1998, 2009) has been described as a 'pragmatic constructivist' (see Harrison et al., 2017), given her pragmatic approach to

constructivist enquiry. This description suggests an integration of both the constructivist and pragmatic epistemologies. So too, while Yin (2018) is oft described as a realist or postpositivist due to his more structured approach to case study research, he is also recognised as a constructionist as he values subjective perspective (see Baxter & Jack, 2008). My position, like the authors mentioned earlier, does not align explicitly with a single epistemology but instead adopts a realist (positivist) approach to a relativist (constructionist) enquiry. A qualitative approach to case study was selected to answer the research questions about how children overcome adversity to foster positive academic outcomes. In this approach, data collection would rely most saliently on interviews and observations based on the idea that the constructed knowledge of these resilient learners could generate detailed descriptions of the resilience-building processes. The premise for this approach is that this knowledge would be constructed both from the participants and researcher and between the participant and researcher. This constructivist epistemology motivates the discovery of meaning and understanding experiences in context. The main aim of the current research is to create meaning from the lived experiences of adversity in fostering academic resilience. It is argued that this would not be best achieved through standardised tools (e.g., surveys or questionnaires), which could restrict the detail and depth of the data generated. Stake (1995, 2006) proposes that understanding the case necessitates that one experiences the action of the case as it unfolds in its specific context and circumstance. This context necessitates participation from the researcher, who is seen as an active agent in the research process. In the current study, processes were continuously documented, and nuances observed in the interviews, thus both the researcher and the

participants could co-create knowledge. In this regard, these processes allowed me to take part in meaning-making.

However, it is not the natural perspective of the current researcher to use a qualitative, constructivist enquiry. Preceding the present study, I used only quantitative approaches to research. While quantitative instruments were not used in the current study, a realist epistemology was maintained regarding the objectivity of resilience as a research phenomenon and field. Consequently, it was accepted as an objective reality that resilience is regarded as 'positive outcomes despite adversity' and that the dynamics of such a process are associated with how individuals negotiate for and identify resources within their social ecologies. Thus, the premise of the current study rested on the *objective truth* that the four participants were academically resilient given that they a) met the predetermined criteria for significant adversity (see Van Rensburg et al., 2015), b) evinced academic achievement based on objective, standardised academic results, and c) participated in locating and utilising resilience enablers in their social ecologies as protective factors against adversity (see Ungar, 2012; Van Breda & Theron, 2018). Moreover, the current researcher argues that the present research findings can be generalised given the well-established documentation procedures used as outlined by Yin (2018). Therefore, my philosophical position for this study can be defined as 'constructive realism'.

This notion of constructive realism is used globally across social science research today. Fritz Wallner (see Wallner & Jandl, 2006), a key proponent of this philosophy, sought to develop an orientation that could eclectically draw on both realist and constructionist realities. These developments, he argued, would form an alternative ontology to the positivist and constructionist epistemologies. Cupchik's (2001) work

proposes that constructive realism represents an alternative perspective that accommodates both constructivism and positivism and their subtending methods. He states that "to build bridges between different social ontologies, we must engage in a transcendental act of reflection and look for similarities in the midst of supposed differences" (p. 3).

These similarities include that both epistemologies allow for multiple sources and methods of data collection and analysis (see Harrison et al., 2017). While the constructionist perspective is typically associated with qualitative approaches to enquiry and the realist is more aligned with quantitative methods, within the case study field, these epistemologies use either (or mixed) designs (see Merriam 2009). While some disagree with integrating qualitative and quantitative methods due to perceived threats to the veracity of the research (see Boblin et al., 2013), Merriam's approach, in particular, shows how flexibility can be served when the integrity of the design is robust. It is on this balance of robustness and structure of realism, in collaboration with the reflexive and interpretive characteristics of constructionism, that the current research is positioned. Cupchik (2001) agrees that if the indiscriminate boundaries and beliefs that keep positivism and constructivism apart can be removed, a reconciliation of the positions is possible.

The idea that research exists in polarity on either side of a spectrum appears naïve. The notion of either-or poses limitations to the possibilities that embody an eclectic worldview for generating knowledge. Tcytcarev and colleagues (2019) maintain that the two-level ontology of constructive realism creates the potential for determining a new, broader knowledge scale. Consequently, constructive realism aligns with the research aims of this study to uncover a deeper understanding of how children interact with their social ecologies to facilitate academic resilience. The

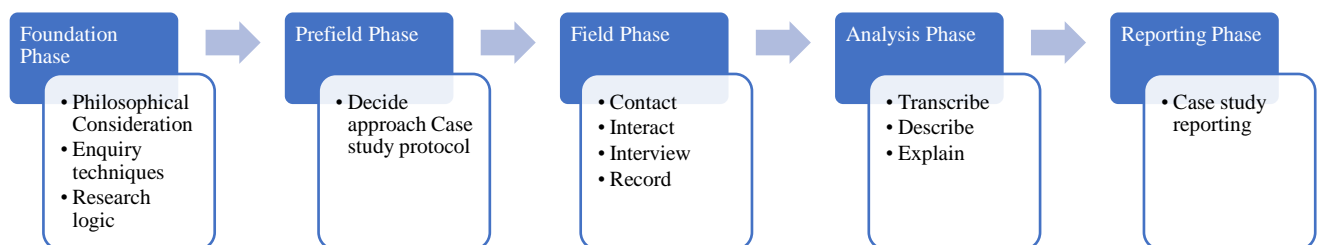
study begins by leaning on Yin's (2014, 2018) realist approach to an enquiry before transferring to Stake's (1995, 2006) constructivist approach. Additionally, the study considers Merriam's (1998, 2009) design integrity to promote credibility and permit flexibility. This flexibility factor was essential for the present study as, at multiple points, both researcher and supervisor reviewed and corrected strategies that would honour the research aims.

### 3.5 Research Process

The overall study was separated into five phases encompassing the entire research process. Each phase was meticulously documented, further bolstering trustworthiness and the potential for replication and generalisability. Figure 3.1 represents the phases undertaken in the current study with the various processes undertaken.

**Figure 3.1**

#### *Case Study Phases*



Adapted from Rashid et al., 2019

#### **3.5.1 Foundation Phase**

The foundation phase represents the first step in this case study process. Ambiguity at this stage can result in challenges as the research continues into later stages. The foundation phase is predicated on an in-depth understanding of the philosophy of the research, which represents the base for how the researcher

approaches the study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998), at this point, the paradigm materialises from the researcher's understanding of ontology and epistemology. For example, the present research is based on a qualitative design since this is considered best for enquiry into richer, in-depth data.

As mentioned earlier, ontology refers to the nature of reality and the individual in the world. Ontology speaks to those questions about what is real and what is considered evidence (Morehouse & Maykut, 2002). According to a constructionist view, human beings continuously construct the realities in which they live. Moreover, there is no objective truth or world because these are considered creations and interpretations of social beings, constructs of our thinking. This view of what can be known means that there is also no value-free research since the process is influenced by the researcher's values and moulded by culture and society. Alternatively, a positivistic ontology suggests that there is indeed an objective truth that exists regardless of the subjectivity of humankind. As discussed, constructive realism represents a coming together of these two views on reality to form a different approach that can draw on both positions' strengths to understand the social phenomena better.

Epistemology refers to the nature and origins of knowing and how knowledge is created (Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996). Epistemology influences the researcher's choice of methodology and whether knowledge can be objectively based on laws of nature or subjectively based on the interpretation of human beings. In the current study, the researcher interprets the reality subjectively guided by the assumption that both investigator and participant co-create understanding whilst the phenomena are explored throughout the process. This perspective informs the constructivist/interpretive arm of the study. However, the enquiry is also considered

through the perspective that reality can be known, explained and generalised. For example, the structure and adoption of criteria for resilience in the current study are objective. This research accepts that resilience requires both the presence of significant adversity and the evidence of positive outcomes despite adversity. These criteria of adversity and positive outcomes (or bouncing back) are accepted as *truth* and therefore draw on a realist approach. However, *how* this resilience is fostered requires detailed description and interpretation. Thus, through a constructive realism orientation, the study positions itself in a manner that can draw on the strengths of both theoretical lenses.

### **3.5.2 Pre-field Phase**

The pre-field phase focuses on the operational details and two critical operational steps. For this the research, the initial step was to decide whether the case study approach would be a good fit for the research question. How children overcome adversity to produce positive academic outcomes requires in-depth inquiry into a bounded system. That is the exposition of richer details from learners who met the criteria for resilience and academic achievement. The overarching idea was to select and utilise a method that permitted the researcher to observe reality in real-time and more easily traverse between participants and literature. According to Rashid and colleagues (2019), case study research comprises an in-depth exploration of empirical data collected over time from a distinct case to analyse the processes and context concerned with the phenomenon under study. Moreover, this phenomenon has value because of its relationship with the context rather than being insulated from its context, as is the case with positivist research.

Since the present research aimed to describe real-life phenomena of academic resilience, a case study methodology was a good fit. According to Merriam and

Tisdell (2016), case studies allow for the possibility of identifying salient factors, processes, and relationships that other methods may not tap. Vogt (2008) maintains that the case study method allows the researcher to focus on the participants' behaviours, attributes, actions, and interactions to add additional value and insight to the findings. For this reason, the researcher recorded continuous process notes on the observations and interactive dynamics within the interview sessions.

The second operational step was to develop the case study protocol. This phase involved the creation of a formal document that encapsulated the entirety of the procedures involved in the collection of empirical data (see Baškarada, 2014). This document helped guide me step-by-step concerning gathering data, empirical data analysis, and case study reporting. According to Edwards (2010), case study protocol should include the research question(s), research method, participant consent, ethical considerations, interpretation, and criteria for assessment.

### **3.5.3 Field Phase**

The researcher's involvement in acquiring and interpreting the material in a qualitative study is fundamental. According to Perecman and Curran (2006), before entering the field, it is vital that the researcher is prepared and competent to record the data that can help to create meaningful findings. The researcher must build rapport with participants and know the cases well for a smooth process to unfold. In the current study, I became familiar with each participant's background based on collateral data obtained from learner documents and recommendation information provided by the schools. Semi-structured interviews, interview observations and document collection are critical data-gathering methods in the case study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), it is the collection of data from multiple sources that aids in triangulation.

Additionally, this collection of empirical data from various sources is a strategy for adding rigour, trustworthiness, depth, and complexity to the study. As mentioned elsewhere, many sources of data collection may be used. I decided on interviews, direct observations, physical artefacts, and documentation for this study. Data was collected from various sources to add dimension and depth throughout the research process. Notably, sample sizes for case study research are typically smaller than those associated with more quantitative methodologies (Schoch, 2020). This is because considerable time and effort are required to appreciate a single case fully. For this reason, four cases were selected for the current research.

#### **3.5.4 Analysis Phase**

The analysis phase involves the total consideration and appreciation of the data collected from multiple sources before making sense of the material. This process can be complex and requires continuous evaluation. Crowe et al. (2011) describe that understanding and affording an intelligible interpretation of the usually different data sources (regardless of qualitative or mixed methods) is a significant challenge.

The voluminous, detail-rich data collected requires repeated review and sorting. Typically, a qualitative analysis uses a process of combing through the data and coding themes. However, how the researcher approaches data analysis is associated with the theoretical orientation through which the researcher perceives the data. Crowe and colleagues assert that the theoretical framework is essential in how data is integrated from multiple sources and how emerging themes are managed. This is an important statement as, according to Ridder (2017), the findings of case study research have implications for both the testing and development of theory (see also Eisenhardt, 1989). The process of testing or developing theory points to an inductive or deductive approach. An inductive approach is typically

associated with developing theory, whilst the deductive approach is ascribed to testing existing theory. The current research sought to make meaning of the data acquired through the lens of the social ecology of resilience framework (SERT). The process lent itself to a deductive undertaking since it is accepted that the participants used and navigated toward resources in their social ecologies to enable resilient outcomes (see Ungar, 2012). This deduction process involved a two-level process of 1) describing the adversity and resilience enablers (see Van Rensburg et al., 2015; Van Breda & Theron, 2018), followed by 2) explaining *how* the participants fostered academic resilience through social-ecological resilience enablers. Thus, the types of risk and resilient factors were described based on Van Rensburg and colleagues' four categories of risk and Van Breda and Theron's categories of resilience enablers. After that, the resilient processes were explained using Ungar's social ecology of resilience framework.

### **3.5.5 Reporting Phase**

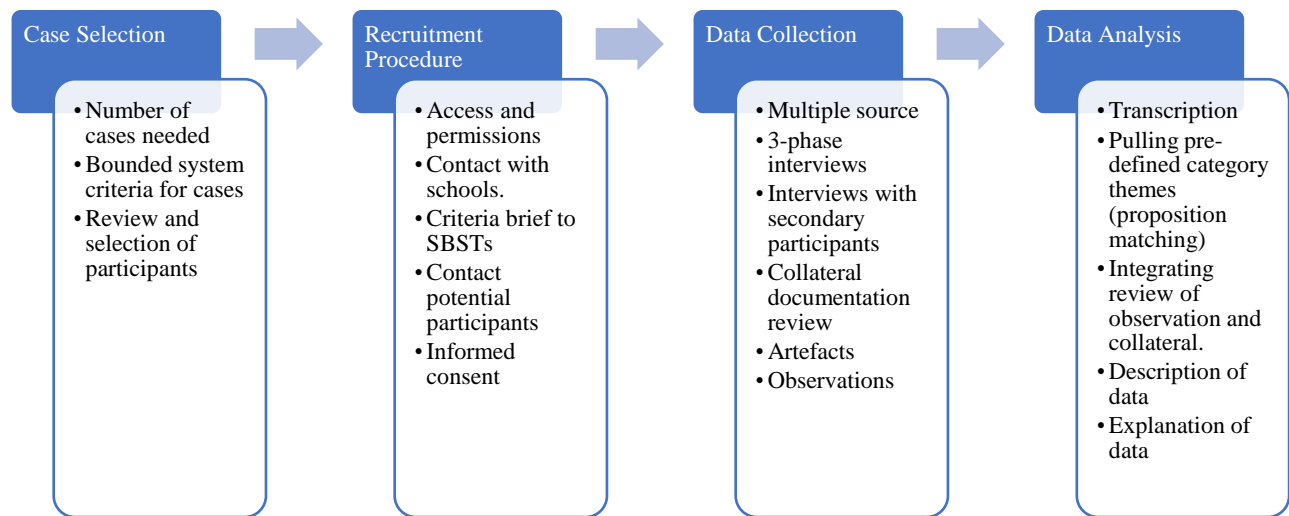
The final phase involved reporting on the empirical material generated during the research process. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998), the value of a case study depends on all three components of data collection, analysis, and reporting. Rashid and colleagues (2019) outline six considerations for reporting on a case study, including (i) case descriptions, (ii) participant descriptions, (iii) relationship descriptions, (iv) details of field protocols, (v) empirical material interpretation and analysis, (vi) conclusion.

According to Connelly (2016), the most fundamental criterion of trustworthiness in research is the credibility of a study and its findings. The credibility of this study lay in the highly detailed documentation of material from multiple sources (as proposed by Yin, 2018). By attending to detailed notetaking, recording material, and highlighting

data that align with the criteria for risk (Van Rensburg et al., 2015) and resilience (Van Breda & Theron, 2018), The researcher could determine the circumstances under which the hypothesis could be tested. This falsification process (see Popper, 2009) is highly rigorous because it allows for rejection or revision when observations do not fit with the proposition (Yin, 2018). Yin further regards that this rigour and potential to repeat the study adds credibility to the research. Further, employing a continuous reflexive process throughout the study bolsters credibility. The process of checking and rechecking the interview recordings preserves the authenticity of the data.

### **3.6 Research Procedure**

The importance of a well-defined and planned research procedure cannot go understated, given that most credibility issues stem from weak procedures (Moon et al., 2016). The research procedure aims to best answer the research question (Creswell et al., 2007). The research procedure of the current study needed to answer how children with lived experiences of adversity foster academic resilience to produce positive academic outcomes. This question guided the research procedure in identifying appropriate cases to explore these phenomena best. Moreover, the research question aided the context in which these cases would be bounded. Finding suitable participants to participate in the study and securing the necessary consent and permission would also comprise ethical considerations. Data would be collected from multiple sources across a three-month schedule to triangulate the findings further. Every step was meticulously captured and reviewed in a continuous evaluation process. The research procedure is illustrated in Figure 3.2.

**Figure 3.2***Stages of Research Procedure*

Compiled by the researcher

**3.6.1 Case Selection**

It is necessary to convey that sample sizes are typically smaller in case study research (Schoch, 2020). While this sample size may appear limited, the nature of the enquiry uncovers greater depth and more detailed descriptions of the phenomena than one would typically associate with quantitative methodologies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moreover, using multiple data sources such as interviews, observations, artefacts, and collateral information all add to the complexity of the phenomena under study (Harrison et al., 2017). Schoch (2020) confirms that the cases that a researcher can reasonably manage within a multiple-case study are three to four distinctive cases.

According to Powell and colleagues (2013), in multiple-case studies, each case should be selected so that it either predicts similar results (literal replication) or predicts contrasting results but for anticipatable reasons (theoretical duplication). If multiple cases lead to contradictory results, the preliminary theory should be revised

and tested with another set of cases. As mentioned elsewhere, single, and multiple designs can be holistic (one unit of analysis per case) or embedded (multiple units of analysis per case). The current study used a multiple-case embedded design since the individual cases were studied as a whole before cross-case comparisons were made to facilitate a synergetic combination of case study elements (see Gustafsson, 2017).

Purposive sampling was used to establish a bounded system of academically resilient Grade 10-12 learners in high schools within the Eastern Cape. According to Creswell et al. (2007), there is value in using purposive sampling because it can "purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study" (p. 125). Furthermore, Ridder (2017) asserts that purposeful sampling is undertaken if seldom observable phenomena are to be explored concerning unfamiliar matters and their relationships.

Thus, this sampling procedure was best given that the study aimed to explore the specific (and rare) resilient processes of children who achieve academically despite lived experiences of significant adversity. Four cases were identified that met the inclusion criteria (see Appendix K) for the research from a total sample of nine available cases. The four cases were co-selected by my supervisor and me to ensure these cases reflected the most salient criteria for 1) categories of experienced adversity and 2) academic achievement. Cases were selected based on whether they richly illuminated how children interact with their social ecologies to facilitate their positive adjustment to the academic domain. Schoch (2020) maintains that purposeful sampling and selecting persons, materials and cases permits the researcher to concentrate in detail on a phenomenon. This focus allows for an in-

depth exploration of the cases from which researchers can learn about critical issues central to the research.

Schools in the area were contacted and provided with a criteria brief (inclusion criteria) for learners who function successfully on an academic level despite significant experiences of adversity. For this research, academic achievement was defined to reflect performance outcomes that demonstrate that a learner has accomplished specific goals that were the focus of the academic activity. The four categories of risk determined by Van Rensburg and colleagues (2018) were used in the criteria brief for the schools. The literature chapter describes these categories: challenging social and physical environments, specific adverse life events, compound socio-demographic risks, and biological vulnerabilities. Once learners were identified, the schools produced a written account of why they believed the identified learners met the criteria brief and supplied additional collateral for review. Primary caregiver(s) and base class teachers were secondary participants in the study. The secondary participants were recruited based on their unique insights into the resilience-building strategies of the primary participants. Table 3.4 depicts the inclusion criteria based on Van Rensburg and colleagues' (2015) risk categories.

**Table 3.4**

*Inclusion Criteria for Participant Selection*

Criteria	Examples
Participants	Learners in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase of secondary schooling (Grades 10, 11 or 12). Learners who have passed every year of their academic schooling career. Learners who have experienced/experience significant risks associated

Challenging social and physical environments	with one or more of the following: Community violence, gangsterism, high exposure to pollution, no access to health-related resources.
AND/OR Specific negative life events	Death of a parent, parental divorce, abuse, neglect, abandonment, severe bullying, substance abuse.
AND/OR Compound sociodemographic risks	Poverty, unemployed parents/ caregivers, single-parent/ caregiver family, child-headed household, poor schooling, poor parenting/caregiving.
AND/OR Biological vulnerabilities	Disability, disease, premature birth, learning disorders, low intellectual ability.

### **3.6.2 Recruitment Procedure**

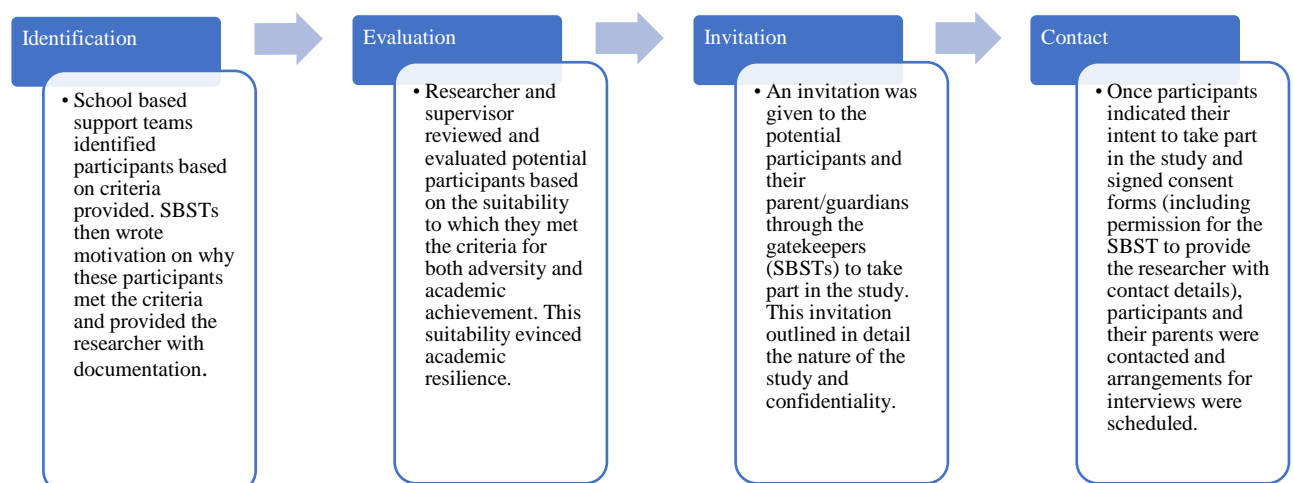
Contact was initially made with the East London school principals from those schools that were cleared for research by the Department of Basic Education. Meetings were scheduled with the principals of the schools to discuss the research process and prospective interview schedules. It was clarified that the interview schedule would ensure that the academic responsibilities of the learners and teachers involved in the study would not be compromised. For this reason, interviews were conducted after school hours at the convenience of the participants. The school-based support team (SBST) heads were contacted to assist as gatekeepers in identifying participants. Meetings were held with the school-based support teams to brief them on the inclusion criteria for identifying prospective participants. According to Singh and Wassenaar (2016), the gatekeepers are those personnel controlling access to the participants. These individuals served as an

advisory panel for gathering data. They identified and referred the participants and provided motivation for why the learners met the inclusion criteria based on their background of adversity and academic achievements.

Collateral information from learner EdLabs (learner records) and LSEN (learners with special education needs) lists were used to evaluate prospective participants. The school-based support team heads then presented the prospective learners identified by the SBSTs with a document describing why these learners were perceived to be academically resilient and whether the learners wished to participate in the current study. Once learners indicated their interest in the study, they were provided with informed consent and information documents on the research and contact information for me and my supervisor should they require further clarification on any aspects of the study. Upon returning their caregivers' consent and assent forms, the school-based support teams comprised a motivational letter outlining why they believed the learner met the criteria brief for the study. This motivation letter and the signed consent forms were returned to the researcher. My supervisor and I considered the collateral information from the schools and the suitability of each participant for the study. Figure 3.3 reflects this process.

**Figure 3.3**

*The Recruiting Procedure*



The four learners identified happened to all be female. It was decided that this gender-specific anomaly presented as an additional focus of the study that might add an extra dimension to the research, given the literature surrounding female gender vulnerability within the South African context.

The researcher then contacted the participants through the school-based support team, and appropriate dates and times were agreed upon and allocated that complimented participants' travel and extra-mural commitments. Interviews were scheduled on afternoons immediately after the academic school day. Table 3.5 reflects the case demographics for each of the four participants in the study.

**Table 3.5**

*Case Demographics*

Case	Participant	Age	Grade	Gender	Race
1	Aviwe	17	11	Female	Black
2	Bianca	16	10	Female	Coloured
3	Claire	18	12	Female	White
4	Dinga	17	11	Female	Black

Pseudonyms are given to protect participant identity.

(Note that according to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) a child is defined as a person under the age of 18. However, for this study, age was not an inclusion/exclusion criterion.)

### **3.7 Data Collection Procedure**

In his book, *The Art of Case Study Research*, Robert Stake (1995) declares that there is no single moment when data capturing begins. He argues that data collection occurs even before the commitment to begin the study via impressionistic, informal backgrounding, first impressions and acquaintance with other cases. Stake

proposes that the essential elements of data gathering include the definition of the case, the research questions to be answered, sources of data, time allocation, costs and intended reporting.

The qualitative case study facilitates the exploration of a phenomenon using various data sources. This collection includes material from numerous sources and is consistent with case study research (see Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). This strategy of multiple-source data generation ensures that the phenomena are viewed through multiple lenses, allowing various facets of the phenomenon to be revealed (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The current study began with the researcher and supervisor acclimatising themselves to the field of case study research. This familiarisation involved an emersion into case study work with particular reference to the salient works of Yin, Merriam, and Stake, among others, and a review of resilience literature within the South African context over the past two decades. The two primary sources of data collection in any qualitative research include interviews and observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to these authors, recording observations are as important as recording interviews. Cope (2014) agrees with this and advocates for persistent observation and reflexivity in the research process. However, as mentioned previously, artefacts and other documentation add to the richness of the data. Table 3.6 depicts the sources of data collection in the present study, while Figure 3.4 illustrates the data collection procedure.

**Table 3.6**

*Data Sources*

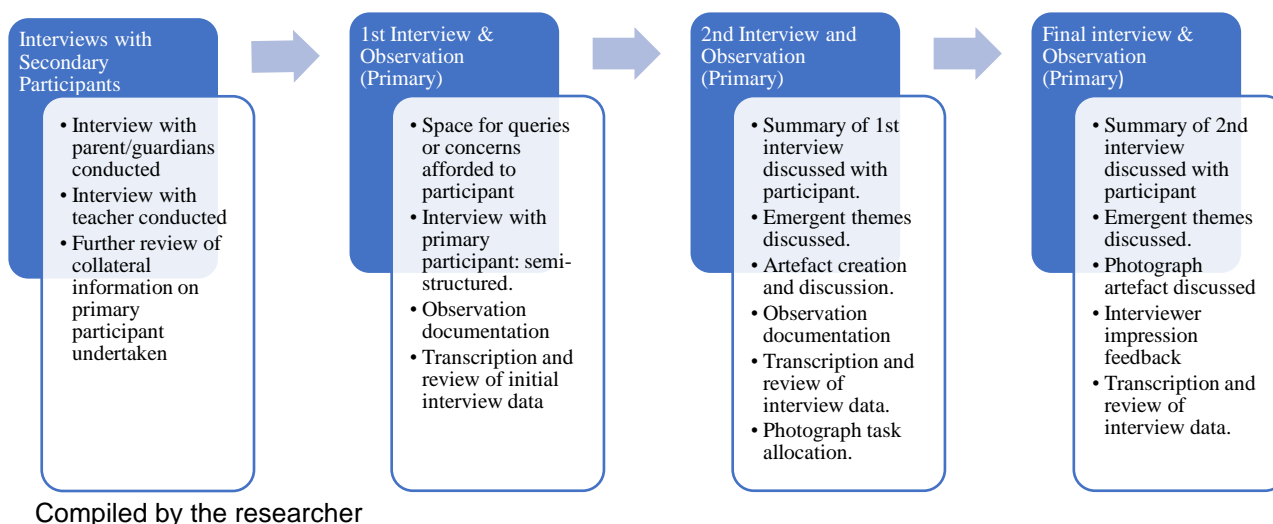
Data Source	Description	Example in Current Study
Observations	The first-hand observable account of the phenomena through participant observation.	Physical descriptions and behaviour in the interview.

Interviews	Guide the data collection toward answering the research question(s).	Semi-structured interviews with primary and secondary participants.
Collateral documentation	Background documented information on the participant relevant to the phenomena under study.	EdLab data, Written accounts, LSEN file report card (results and comments).
Artefacts	Physical evidence that is both collected and observed reflects the phenomena under study.	Clay modelling, photographs, and drawings.

Adapted from Yin, 2018

**Figure 3.4**

*Data Collection Procedure*



### 3.7.1 Observations

According to Stake (1995), observations allow the researcher to move to a more profound understanding of the case. This greater comprehension of the phenomena is based on the premise that qualitative data have meanings directly organised by the observer. Stake follows that it is essential for the researcher to sustain a thorough record of observed incidents and provide a relatively indisputable description for further analysis and reporting.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), observations are dissimilar to interviews in that the researcher acquires a first-hand account of the phenomenon under study rather than relying on the interpretations of others. During the present study, meticulous and reflexive notetaking was done to document what I observed during the interview. These descriptions included participants' physical characteristics, how they verbally expressed stories, their observable behaviour and mannerisms, and interactions with the researcher and task (e.g., artefact creation).

Yin (2018) states that observations form an essential part of case study *listening*, which he describes as accepting information via multiple modalities beyond the aural. Keen observations contribute to reflexive opportunities in interviewing (e.g., adding additional questions based on observable non-verbal responses made by participants). Thus, observations help guide the data collection toward the research aim and facilitate greater detail and depth to the data acquired.

### **3.7.2 Semi-structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews are one of the primary methods for data collection (Creswell, 2012). According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), semi-structured interviews are a goal-directed dialogue between participants and researchers. The goal of the current study was to answer the research questions. Knox and Burkard (2009) argue that semi-structured interviews offer the advantage of exploring new domains of interest that may arise during the interview process. This reflexive capacity helps ensure that potentially salient data is not missed, as might be true when following a more rigid and structured interview process. Primary (learners) and secondary (teachers and parents) interviews were recorded over a three-month interview schedule timeframe and transcribed verbatim.

As discussed, this study aimed to address the research questions regarding how some children evince academic resilience in the face of significant adversity. Given that multiple cases were used, a uniform way of recording data was used to support analysis and reliability. Data was collected via three processes (see Table 3.5 and Figure 3.4): 1) face-to-face semi-structured interviews (conducted with the adolescents, their primary caregiver(s) and teachers separately), which included open-ended questions related to the research focus, 2) continuous observation and qualitative impressions, and 3) review of collateral information and artefacts. Three individual interviews were conducted with each participating learner over three months (November 2021 to January 2022) to establish rapport and allow for follow-up questions once initial interview data had been reviewed. All interviews were recorded and then fully transcribed for analysis. The data generated for each case was immense. Each interview comprised approximately 20 typed pages of transcriptions. Four cases generated around 100 pages each following the interview schedule with primary and secondary participants. Additionally, recorded observation data was also included.

An interpreter was not necessary for the primary interviews as the learners were all competent in English and attended secondary schools where English is the language of instruction. A case study database was also used to manage the collected information. Secondary informants (teachers and parents) were also interviewed for additional data gathering and checking. These confirmatory conversations were also recorded and transcribed. Table 3.7 represents the interview process undertaken in this study.

**Table 3.7***Interview Process*

Orientation	Introductions and exchange of contact details. Description of the study and the interview process. Clarify any expectations regarding non-attribution, data sharing, and other issues.
Information Gathering	The interviewer uses semi-structured questions to guide the interview to record responses as well as observations on what is seen.
Closing	The interviewer reviews the key points, issues, and action items and confirms accuracy with the respondent. The interviewee is invited to provide feedback on the interview process. The interviewer thanks the interviewee and seeks permission for any future contact.

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Kasunic, 2010

As discussed, the interviews with participants were scheduled over three months (one interview per month). This strategy was done for several reasons. It was decided that a sequential process with each participant would better ensure rapport between the participants and me. The initial interview covered the background of adversity experienced by the participants and verbal reflections on their characteristics and external supports that aided them in academic achievement. The second interview provided a follow-up on information gathered in the initial interview. In this phase, further detail was elicited on emergent themes to generate more detailed and in-depth material.

Furthermore, participants also created artefacts that would further enrich the data, including drawing, clay modelling and photographic pictures. Dialogue between the interviewer and participant around the artefacts added additional reflections on their resilience processes. The final interview provided an opportunity to identify any material that might have been missed during the initial interviews.

Additionally, prospective themes were presented to the participants for checking and feedback. Table 3.8 reflects the interview timeline for each case's primary and secondary participants.

**Table 3.8**

*Interview Timeline*

Case	Teacher Interview	Parent Interview	1 <sup>st</sup> Participant Interview	2 <sup>nd</sup> Participant Interview	3 <sup>rd</sup> Participant Interview
1	October 2021	October 2021	October 2021	November 2021	January 2022
2	October 2021	October 2021	November 2021	November 2021	January 2022
3	November 2021	November 2021	November 2021	December 2021	January 2022
4	November 2021	December 2021	November 2021	December 2021	January 2022

**3.7.3 Artefacts and Collateral Information**

Artefacts were an additional component of the knowledge-generating process. According to Merriam (2009), artefacts are collected or observed as a source of case study data and have been used extensively in studies of children. In the second interview phase, the participants were requested to create artefacts that could provide further depth and richness to their lived experiences of adversity and transactions with their social ecologies. Two participants chose to draw pictures and describe the meanings within them. The other two participants decided to use the medium of clay to craft material from which further information could be uncovered and gathered regarding their resilience processes. The participants demonstrated their understanding of academic resilience and identified their processes for facilitating identification and interaction with resources in their social ecologies. Additionally, learners were tasked with taking photographs outside of the interview using their cell phones. The participants were encouraged to identify and photograph protective factors/resources that supported their adjustment to academic demands (see Kumpulainen et al., 2016).

These artistic expressions created additional freedom and space for the participants to make meaning of their lived experiences of adversity and overcome them. Artefacts are valuable when resistance may be a barrier to verbal expression. For example, Bianca (Case 2) experienced difficulty articulating her challenges verbally. She had not received any formal counselling for the adversity she had endured. The interview was the first occasion in which she had unpacked the hardships in her life. Bianca preferred to use artistic mediums as a vehicle for dialogue. This artistic expression also helped to contain anxiety and gave Bianca control of her expression as the threats that may accompany interview questions were minimised.

The use of photographs allows the participant to generate in-context material. Dabbs (1982) promotes photographs to convey salient case characteristics to outside observers. This way, participants can capture a context-specific characteristic of their resilience process, which would not be available within the interview setting. Bogdan and Biklen (2011) describe the use of photography in data collection as a way of recalling and reviewing detail that might otherwise have been unnoticed had a photographic image not been available.

Tinkler (2013) describes a process called *photo-elicitation* in which participants are shown photographs that associate with the phenomena. In the case of the present research, the participant brought the photograph to the researcher to stimulate a discussion of resilience.

Artefacts also create an opportunity for the participant to reflect on their creations and assume a stance of introspection that stimulates dialogue and data generation. It was ensured that artefacts were socio-culturally appropriate and operationalised in a manner and time convenient to the learners.

An additional source of data was collected in the form of collateral information. This collateral information was derived from report cards and documents obtained from the learners' EdLab folders. These EdLab folders contained information about the learners' school history, previous assessments, disciplinary records, and awards. Moreover, previous and current written teacher comments aided in creating an academic engagement history. Permission was sought from all participants and their caregivers before accessing the EdLab folders. Moreover, participants kept the artefacts following the interviews.

### **3.8 Data Analysis**

According to Groundwater-Smith and colleagues (2012), one of the least developed aspects of case study research is the analysis of case study evidence. He argues that for many case study researchers, having little to no statistical analysis recipe leads to stalling and confusion about what to do with their data. There is no fixed recipe for analysing case study data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 2006). Yin encourages researchers to 'play' with the data and search for patterns, insights, and concepts that align with the research aims.

A salient strategy advocated by Yin (2018) is to use the theoretical propositions that led to the case study in the first place. This propositional method allows the researcher to work the data to create a case description and examine explanations that reflect the study's aims. In this way, the 'how' questions relating to the processes by which children at risk become academically resilient are related to the theoretical propositions of adversity and resilience. Yin (2018) maintains that "the propositions help to organize the entire analysis, pointing to relevant contextual conditions to be described as well as explanations to be examined" (p. 216).

Theoretical propositions also lay the groundwork for making *analytic* rather than *statistical generalisations*. As mentioned earlier, analytic generalisability is associated with theoretical propositions, not populations. This distinction is a fundamental difference from the statistical inferences one might make from other, more quantitative approaches to research. Thus, the current research data links to the theoretical propositions of the study and promotes generalisability. Theoretical propositions in case study research are also important, given the temptation to cover *everything* about the participant(s). As previously mentioned, the data collected from each case was significant. Without the theoretical propositions guiding the data analysis, the risk of 'getting lost' in coding themes and discerning essential versus non-essential characteristics in the seemingly overwhelming content collected from multiple sources was a real possibility. Propositions direct awareness to elements that should be examined within the scope of the study. Theoretical propositions explain the phenomena (resilience) under study and support theory building. The current study identified three essential sub-propositions for the present study, illustrated in Table 3.9.

**Table 3.9**

*Theoretical Phenomena and Propositions*

Phenomena	Proposition	Examples
Adversity	When experienced, circumstances and characteristics are statistically more likely to promote significantly adverse developmental outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenging social and physical environments (e.g., gangsterism).</li> <li>• Specific negative life events (e.g., death of a parent).</li> <li>• Compound socio-demographic risks (e.g., poverty).</li> <li>• Biological vulnerabilities (e.g., learning disabilities).</li> </ul>

Academic Resilience process	Children identify and negotiate for resources within their social ecologies to support overcoming adversity and fostering better-than-expected academic outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal (e.g., intellect).</li> <li>• Relational (e.g., caring parent).</li> <li>• Structural (e.g., quality of schooling).</li> <li>• Spiritual/cultural (e.g., religion).</li> </ul>
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Based on Van Rensburg et al., 2015 and Van Breda & Theron, 2018

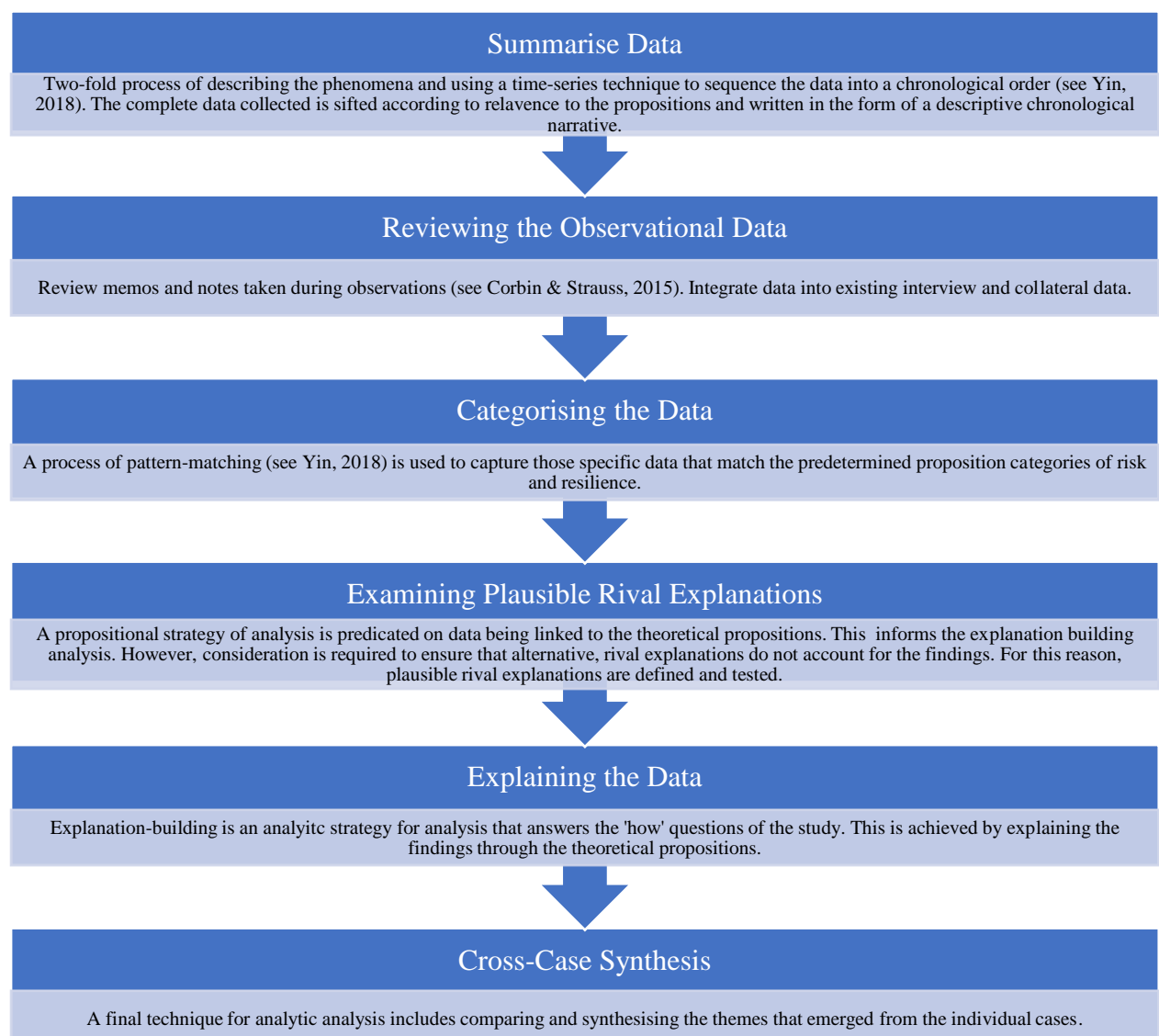
From the above, the primary, overarching theoretical proposition of Ungar's (2012) social ecology resilience theoretical framework (SERT) was utilised to conceptualise the research aims, comprise research questions, direct the data collection and analyse the data. The current study subscribed to the theory that children who continue to achieve academically despite the lived experience of significant adversity were 1) academically resilient and 2) demonstrated such academic resilience because of the strategies used to identify and navigate toward resilience-enabling resources and processes. Thus, research was not necessary to identify academically resilient participants, as it was accepted, based on the predetermined theory (SERT), that they were academically resilient given their academic achievement and alignment with the adversity criteria outlined by Van Rensburg and colleagues (2015). The aim involved describing and explaining *how* these children accomplished this process. Techniques for analysing the data were therefore aimed at focusing on the data that spoke directly to those strategies of negotiating for and navigating toward resources in their social ecologies.

Yin (2018) identifies five techniques for analysing case study research. These include pattern-matching, explanation building, time-series, logic models, and cross-case analysis. As mentioned, the data emerging from such techniques are linked to the study's propositions. Yin maintains that any singular or combination of the five techniques can be used in analysing the data.

The current study established a 6-phase data analysis procedure to describe and explain the data collected from various sources. Various analytic techniques included pattern-matching, time-series (chronological ordering), explanation building and cross-case synthesis. Figure 3.5 illustrates the analysis procedures executed in the current study.

**Figure 3.5**

*Data Analysis Procedure*



### **3.8.1 Summarising the Data**

Tay (2017) asserts that one helpful way to start an analytic strategy is by using a time-series technique to put collected data into chronological order. The data were summarised into descriptive narratives after each interview with the participants. Once all interviews were concluded, the data was again summarised (according to the study propositions) into a chronological narrative for each participant. This narrative helped orient the researcher to the participant's experiences and supported the identification of the sequences of resilience enablers utilised in the individual's resilience-building processes. Integrating the data into a descriptive chronological narrative was necessary to delineate the essential data from data that did not reflect the aims of the research questions and propositions for the study. According to Yin, "the analytic goal is to compare the chronology with that predicted by some explanatory theory" (p. 235). Thus, the chronological narrative of each case was formulated through the lens of the social ecology resilience framework, which explained how these individuals fostered academic resilience.

### **3.8.2 Reviewing the Observational Data**

Corbin and Strauss (2015) maintain that it is good practice for researchers to write memos and notes on what they observe during case study fieldwork. A primary component of the data collection involved continuous observation. Note-taking was performed on the researcher's part to record observations during the interviews and reflections on collateral data provided by the schools. These notes helped to guide subsequent interview themes and questions.

A secondary element to reviewing the data involved participant perspective checking. After each interview, observations and perceptions were shared with the

participant for relevance and resonance. This feedback added additional security to the data generated.

### **3.8.3 *Categorising the Data***

Data from the interviews with primary and secondary participants, as well as relevant observational and collateral information, were collated into themes that reflected the theoretical propositions of the study – this process aligned with a pattern-matching technique. Information retrieved from multiple sources was initially compared and matched to the propositional criteria. Afterwards, the data were categorised into one (or more) of the four criteria categories in table form, reflecting both adversity and resilience enablers. This process of categorising the data helped to create a visual representation of the themes that would support the explanation-building and cross-case phase of analysis.

### **3.8.4 *Examining Plausible Rival Explanations***

Rival explanations in designing and conducting case study research are critical (Mills et al., 2010). The emphasis here is on 'plausible' rival explanations rather than any competing hypothesis that may explain the findings. This analytic strategy of trying to define and test plausible explanations is ideally considered before data collection. Moreover, researchers should endeavour to collect evidence about these potential alternative influences.

In the present study, one rival explanation rested on the condition of academic achievement. The question of whether the academic results achieved by the participants were authentically reflected needed to be considered. Schools may inflate grades, children may cheat, or the testing standard may be lacking. For this reason, efforts were made to review academic results over a sustained period (three years) of which at least one provincial benchmark (Grade 9) results were considered.

This consideration ensured that the participants had achieved academically within a typical academic context.

An additional rival explanation included controlling for adversity. There existed the possibility that experiences of adversity could be fabricated or exaggerated.

Corroboration of the events was checked against multiple sources to ensure the experiences were authentic. Collateral documentation in the learner school files and reports from previous teachers and health professionals were checked against the reported adversity. Thus, the researcher aimed to verify these experiences with evidence beyond the personal narratives of the learners.

### **3.8.5 Explaining the Data**

The final process of analysis involves explaining the case. According to Yin (2018), the aim is to analyse the case study data by building an explanation of the case. He adds that "to "explain" a phenomenon is to stipulate a presumed set of causal sequences about it, or "how" or "why" some outcome has occurred" (p. 228).

This analysis strategy fits with the current study's aims, given that the goal is to explain *how* some children demonstrate academic resilience despite adversity when others do not. Moreover, the explanations are directly linked to the theoretical propositions regarding Ungar's (2012) SERT and the predetermined categories of resilience enablers outlined by Van Breda and Theron (2018). Consequently, the findings are explained within the framework of the resilience enablers that participants identified and used to achieve positive academic outcomes. Explanation-building occurs in a narrative form. This narrative approach is used because causal sequences in case study research are regarded as overly complex to measure (see Sondag et al., 2020). Thus, I was tasked with storying the resilience processes of the participants and feeding back the findings for reflection and possible revision.

### **3.8.6 Cross-case Synthesis**

The use of multiple-case studies presents several benefits to case study research. According to Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007), multiple-case studies permit a more expansive discovery of theoretical evolution and research questions. Theoretically, propositions can be linked to a more comprehensive availability of data from which a process of explanation building can follow. The evidence from a multiple-case study has historically been considered more compelling and robust (Herriott & Firestone, 1983). However, the time and resources needed to undertake a multiple-case study design are considerable, and this is a consequence that was accepted before undertaking the current research. Many hours were used to transcribe and compare data.

Cross-case synthesis differs from typical quantitative methods that are dependent on reductionist orientations. This approach disregards the wholeness of any single respondent (Sturman, 1997). According to Byrne (2009), cross-case synthesis should have a 'case-based' rather than a 'variable-based' approach. This case-based approach allows for conclusions based on the cases rather than the variables. Byrne maintains that the aim is to preserve the integrity of the whole case. After that, the researcher compares or synthesises particular within-case patterns across the cases.

Each participant in this research was carefully selected with the hypothesis that they would predict similar results. This strategy speaks to the theoretical replication of the primary proposition – SERT. Importantly, Yin (2018) states that if the case studies turn out as predicted, they would indicate compelling evidence for the set of propositions that pertain to the general multiple-case study. However, if the case study data are contradictory, Yin insists that the initial propositions be revised and

retested with a new set of case studies. Synthesising predictable outcomes with data analysed from individual cases adds credibility and allows for analytic generalisation. In the current study, the prediction (hypothesis) is that academically resilient children were able to overcome significant adversity due to their interactions with resilience enablers in their social ecologies. The findings of the data are in agreement with this hypothesis. If the findings did not agree, I would have needed to revisit the propositions.

Data were initially analysed with each independent case study and associated with the theoretical framework of SERT. After that, the data from the individual case studies were compared and synthesised with the other cases to explore patterns in the data sets.

### **3.9 Ethical Considerations**

Clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the General and Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) at the University of the Free State (UFS-HSD2016/1394) (see Appendix A). The Eastern Cape Department of Education granted permission to contact the schools to identify resilient learners for the study (Appendix B). Per requirement, examples of the semi-structured interview protocols were submitted to the relevant ethical committees (Appendices H, I and J). Participants were part of the research process, and the results will be respectfully communicated to them. All participants were provided with a formal document outlining the nature of the research and the expectations for participation (Appendices C, D, E and F). Participants were also requested to seek clarification on any information that may have appeared ambiguous or confusing. The caregivers and teachers were also given informed consent letters and permitted to enquire should they have any concerns during the process. Confidentiality remained a pivotal

component of ethical considerations – particularly given the sensitive nature of the information generated during the research process.

For this reason, all recordings were kept on a password-protected device and pseudonyms were used in place of names. The names of schools were also omitted from the data generated. Transcribed data were stored on a password-protected PC. All participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the research and that they had the choice to terminate participation at any time, without reason, should they choose. A total of six participants returned signed consent forms only to end their involvement before the interviews.

An additional consideration included the time of year for academic engagement. The fourth term encompasses the final formal examinations of the school year, which was especially important for the Grade 11 learners aspiring to apply to university. For this reason, interviews were scheduled in advance and did not occur in the same week as tests or examinations. The participants were also allowed to reschedule the interviews should these conflict with their study timetable.

### **3.9.1 *Confronting Adversity (re-living threats)***

Containment and debriefing were provided for the participants. It was emotionally challenging for some of the learners to reflect on the adversities that they had experienced. None of the participants had unpacked the issues with a mental health professional, and it was clear that talking about the problematic experiences created a degree of turmoil. For the benefit and well-being of the participants, it became necessary to contain the process through unconditional positive regard.

Furthermore, a safe environment for the participants to discuss challenges was accommodated. Before continuing, interview questions were set aside to work through any aspects of the learner's stories. An outside psychologist was made

available for the participants to engage with should they wish to seek support. This access to support ensured participants could continue unpacking these difficulties post-interview.

Moreover, the school-based support team heads were notified, and efforts were made to connect the learners with the school counsellors if they required support during school hours. Teachers were also advised to consider learners' needs surrounding interview times.

### **3.10 Trustworthiness**

As Baxter and Jack (2008) proposed, several vital elements were integrated to enhance the overall quality and trustworthiness of the study. As indicated earlier, Yin (2018) proposed tactics for tackling construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. The following tactics and processes enhanced the credibility, dependability, and transferability:

- The basic foundation of case study research was adhered to (e.g., research design appropriate for the research question; purposive sampling; data collected and managed effectively; data analysed). Since case study research does not have universal protocols (see Yazan, 2015), research should clearly define and demonstrate steps to findings so that future researchers can follow the process for transferability and verifiability, and rigour could be obtained. The detailed and contextualised description of each case further supports trustworthiness.
- The use of multiple sources of data evidence in the collection phase and a draft case study report review by the supervisor supported construct validity.
- Triangulation of data sources ensured that the phenomena were viewed and explored from multiple perspectives. Including visual, narrative, and observational data collected at separate phases provided rich accounts of the academic

resilience processes. The addition of teacher and parent interviews further enriched the knowledge generated during the interviews with participants and added further discussion points for the subsequent interviews that may have been overlooked. Additionally, artefacts for reflection and meaning-making added a further dimension to participants' narratives. Triangulation also bolsters construct validity.

- Intense and prolonged exposure to the phenomenon established rapport with participants. Multiple perspectives could be collected to reduce the potential of social desirability in interview responses. The interviews were scheduled over three months (one interview per month), creating a connection between participants and the researcher and familiarity with the interview exchanges. This process also allowed the researcher to develop and offer insights to the participant for checking.
- A process of 'member checking' was employed where the researcher's description/interpretation of the data collected was shared with the participants to create an opportunity to discuss and clarify information or contribute additional perspectives. This process was done throughout the interviewing phase, emphasising the third interview once themes had emerged.
- Continuous reflection, the maintenance of field notes and peer examination of data contributed to the credibility of the research. This reflection helped to control researcher bias. A falsification test (see Popper, 2009) was also used to maintain credibility.
- Pattern-matching and explanation building during the analysis phase aided with internal validity.

- External validity was considered through the replication logic of a multiple case study design.
- Double-coding was implemented at the analysis stage to promote the consistency and dependability of the data.
- Finally, the reliability was built on a robust case study protocol and utilisation of a case study database.

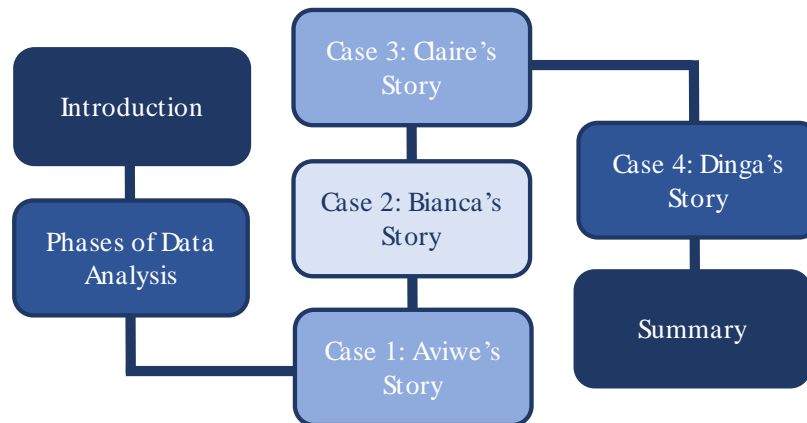
### **3.11 Summary**

This chapter outlined the methodological orientation for the current research. It was decided that a multiple-case study design will best describe and explain academically resilient children's resilience-enabling interactions with resources and processes. A discussion of the constructive realism epidemiological orientation underpinning the study was unpacked, and the reasons why drawing on both realist and constructionist perspectives complemented the aims of the present study. The strategies for identifying and recruiting participants according to the bounded criteria were outlined to complement the case study. Data collection methods involving multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews, observations, collateral documents, and artefacts, were described.

Additionally, the analytic analysis advocated by Yin (2018) was introduced as the overall theoretical proposition strategy that guided analysis. Moreover, the six analysis phases were outlined, corresponding with the various analysis techniques, including pattern-matching, explanation-building, time-series, and cross-case synthesis. Finally, the ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the study were discussed in keeping with the overall aims.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS: DESCRIPTIVE DATA



#### 4.1 Introduction

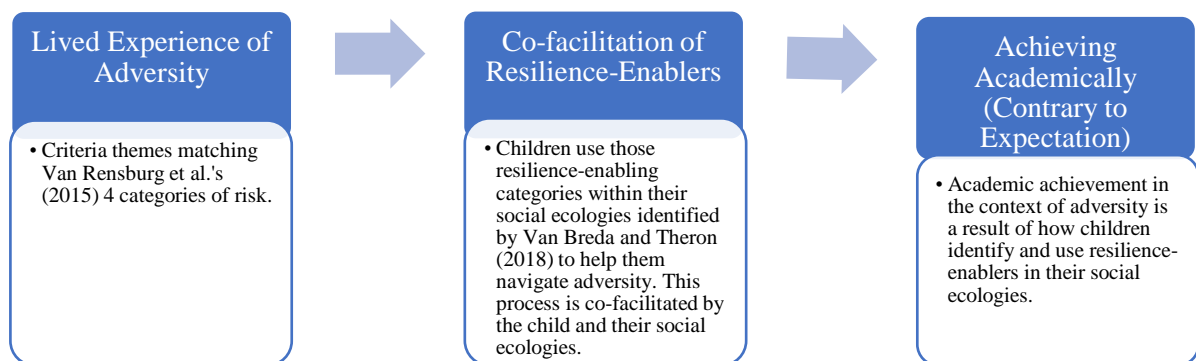
As discussed in the previous chapter, the analysis phase of the study is delineated into two primary processes: the first process involves the descriptive narrative in which the data is collated and summarised into a chronological time-series based on the theoretical propositions. The second process involves an explanation-building process undertaken to explain how the children fostered academic resilience within the proposition framework of SERT. Both these processes are described in Yin's (2018) text *Case Study Research and Application Design and Methods*. Additionally, the analytic data approach is guided by the theoretical propositions of the study. The propositions are formulated from the key issues from the research literature. Thus, the techniques used to analyse the data are in keeping with the predicted outcomes of the theoretical propositions.

This chapter outlines and collates the raw data findings generated from the interviews, observations and collateral information acquired over the data collection process. This data is vast which necessitates that only those data linked to the

relevant theoretical propositions are considered. This consideration of the data-to-theoretical proposition process is the backbone of analysis for this multiple-case study approach and is strongly advocated by Yin (2018). This is because the analytic purpose is to generalise to the theoretical proposition rather than to the population (as would be the case for statistical analysis). The salient theoretical proposition for this study includes that children at risk successfully identify and navigate toward protective resources and processes in order to both mitigate threats and foster resilience. In the context of education, this capacity to recruit and negotiate for supports within the social ecologies, is what SERT describes as resilience-building (see Jefferis & Theron, 2017; Ungar, 2012; Van Breda, 2017) that defines academic resilience. This overarching theoretical proposition is illustrated in Figure 4.1.

**Figure 4.1**

*Theoretical Proposition for the Academic Resilience Process*



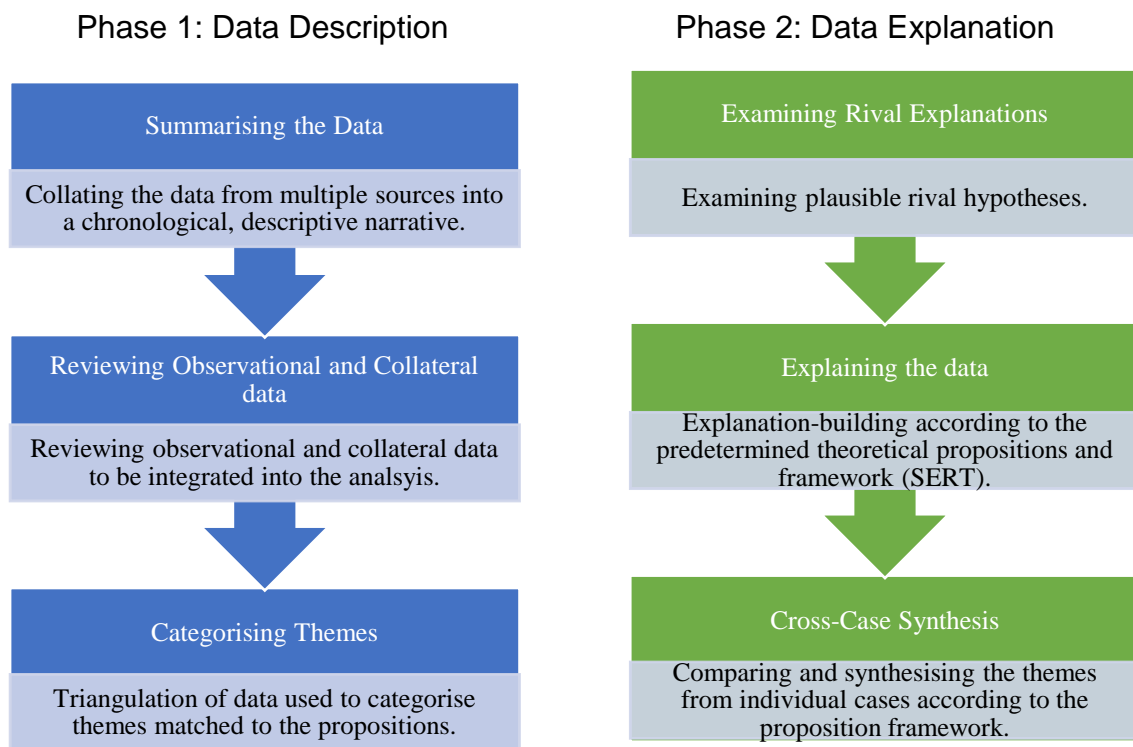
## 4.2 Phases of Data Analysis

The data acquired from four individual cases can be described as copious. These large data sets are a result of collecting data from multiple sources over a three-month data collection schedule. The aim of the research is to answer the question of how children at risk overcome adversity to succeed academically. The goal of the analysis is to answer this research question. For the purposes of the current study, the researcher agreed with Yin's (2018) analytic strategy of linking relevant data to

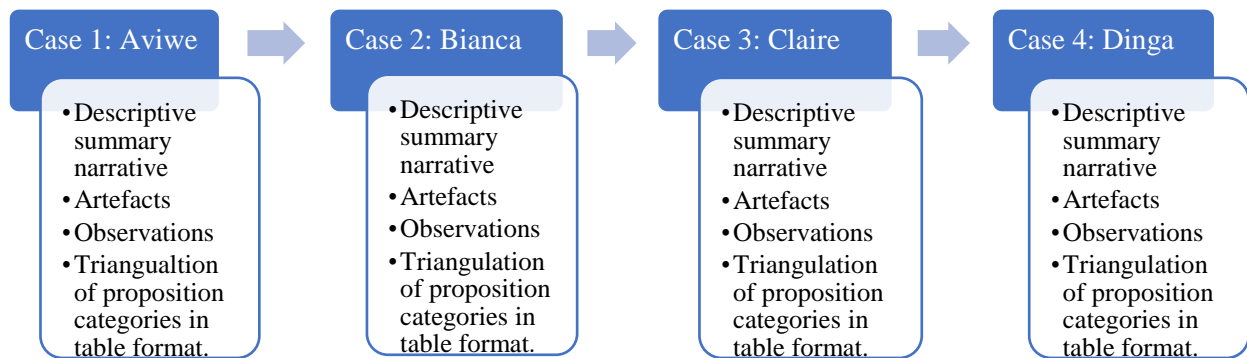
the theoretical propositions. Many qualitative approaches use a process of thematic analysis for combing through the data and identifying and assigning thematic codes such as Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase model of thematic analysis. However, the current research required a divergent approach, thus, while Braun and Clarke's model was initially considered as the analysis strategy, an evaluative and reflexive process (a strength of case study research) allowed for reconsideration as to what strategy would align best with the aims of the study.

Since the study builds onto pre-established findings within the local context of South Africa, it was accepted as unnecessary to reinvent the wheel. A decade-long review by Van Rensburg and colleagues (2015) had already established the salient categories of adversity for children in South Africa. Thus, data relevant to these categories needed only to be matched rather than re-identified. Similarly, Van Breda and Theron's 2009-2017 review of resilience enablers amongst children in South Africa had also been undertaken, thus, identifying themes of resilience enablers was considered redundant. What has not been established, is *how* children experiencing the adversities identified above utilised the identified resilience enablers to foster academic achievement.

The data analysis was delineated into two processes. The first process, which is the prerogative of this chapter, involved a descriptive approach to the data. The second phase (outlined in Chapter 5) included the explanation of the data as related to the propositions of the study. The two phases of analysis are illustrated in Figure 4.2.

**Figure 4.2***Data Analysis Phases*

Each individual case begins with a chronological descriptive narrative of events relevant to the propositions of adversity and resilience (their story). This narrative orientates the reader to the participant's experiences and includes interview data from the primary and secondary participants as well as background collateral. Artefacts are then included with participant descriptions thereof. Following this, the researcher observations and perceptions are included. Category themes of adversity and resilience are presented in table format following triangulation from the multiple data sources to illustrate how the data patterns are matched with the predetermined categories. The four cases will be analysed in order according to Figure 4.3.

**Figure 4.3***Case Order***4.3 Case 1: "Aviwe's Story"**

Aviwe is a seventeen-year-old Grade 11 learner at a local high school in East London. She was identified by the school-based support team as a suitable candidate for the research due to her exemplary academic results despite a history of challenges. Aviwe began her schooling career at a private school as she had reportedly shown high intellectual ability and it was decided by her family that she would benefit from the purported "better standard of education". However, when Aviwe turned seven years old, her parents divorced. Her father left the home, having reportedly put the family in significant financial debt. Her grandmother stated,

*they had no money and so many bills, she (Aviwe's mother) didn't know what to do. I took them in, but there were a lot of changes. Aviwe never complained, she just carried on.*

Aviwe's mother was left to raise Aviwe and her two younger siblings. Aviwe was then transferred from her private school to a government primary school closer to the family residence as her mother could no longer afford the school fees or transport costs. Aviwe stated that the standard of education at the new school was so low that

she was not challenged, and her teachers would often fail to arrive for class. Aviwe maintained,

*I think the standard was much lower. The things they (teachers) taught us I had already learned long before that. I don't think I learned anything really new for quite a while at that school.*

Shortly after this, Aviwe's mother became sick, and she and her siblings were put in the care of their maternal grandmother in a local township area. Aviwe's mother still plays an active role in her life and has begun studying a BSc degree. While Aviwe has not had contact with her father since he left, her maternal uncle has been present and assists the family financially. Aviwe relates that,

*my mom's brother is a successful man, he's a lawyer in Bisho. Sometimes he visits us and he talks to me about my education and how I must make sure I get good marks so I can go to a good university and get a good career. That's what my mom is trying to do now, she's working hard to get a degree so that she can support us.*

*Aviwe is also active at her local church and views her faith as a key factor in her life.*

*My gogo (grandmother) basically lives at church. I've been going since I can remember. My faith is very important to me – it gives me hope. I don't know how people keep going without purpose and faith.*

The neighbourhood is described as crime-ridden and unsafe with a high prevalence of gang-related activities. Aviwe described that running had been a significant coping mechanism for her, but that this strategy was affected by safety concerns. Attempts were made from the family to contact Aviwe's father with no

success. Aviwe and her siblings are currently recipients of SASSA childcare grants.

Her grandmother reports that,

*Aviwe has always been a good girl. When the other girls play around, she works. She has always been this way even when she was a young child. I do not have to remind her to do her studies and work at home – she does them... I think she is a smart girl, she works hard, she wants to succeed, she is like her mother.*

Aviwe described that her current high school was not her first (or second) choice, but it was the most affordable for her family. Aviwe described that the breaks from school due to the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative effect on her studies. She relayed that she had little access to internet and struggled to keep up with the curriculum demands. Despite this, she met the requirements to pass in 2020 and achieved academic colours in 2021. Aviwe described,

*it was difficult during the lockdown because we don't have facilities where you can just go and research. I was using all my cell phone data in a few days, and we couldn't afford to buy more so I couldn't study how I usually do by reading online. Other kids at my school were more fortunate – they could keep working, I had to make a plan. I arranged a trade with my neighbour; I agreed to help her son with mathematics in exchange for their WIFI password.*

Her disciplinary record is described by teachers as "spotless" aside from demerits she received from arriving late to school. Aviwe maintained that this tardiness was due to unreliable transport. She related that there are days when she cannot get to school as the taxi transport does not arrive or breaks down on route

*it's hard because things happen and they're out of your control.*

*Sometimes the taxi comes but the driver looks shady, other times the taxi doesn't get to my stop because it broke down somewhere or got pulled over.*

Despite these challenges, Aviwe has achieved academic colours consistently. Her teachers describe that she is responsible and diligent. She reportedly follows the school rules and exemplifies the type of learner that the school advocates which led to her being selected as a prefect. Her base class teacher asserted that Aviwe will go out of her way to look for additional responsibilities and regularly remains after hours to assist staff with cleaning and packing up. Her teacher reports,

*Aviwe is a very helpful learner, I think she is liked by all teachers here because she is friendly, respectful and is always ready to lend a hand and stay behind when others run off to break. I think this gains her favour from teachers, so they're prepared to go the extra mile for Aviwe because she puts in the work. Teachers reward those who show good work ethic.*

Aviwe maintains that,

*I know that to make it in this world I have to work hard. My uncle taught me that and my mother shows me that now... I am a hard worker; I don't mess around and I know that if I work hard now it will be better for me later. Sacrifice is important, it's like running, the more work you put in now when it's hard, the easier it can become later when you are fit and strong... I think all things are like that.*

Aviwe was asked to take a photograph of something that embodies her ability to achieve academically despite the challenges in her life (see Figure 4.4).

**Figure 4.4**

*Photograph of Resilience: Aviwe*



*These are my running shoes. They are very special to me. My mom bought them for me three years ago. They were expensive and I know she wanted to get them for me. She knows how important running and exercise are to me. They're not in the best shape – they've been fixed because they had holes in them, but they do the job. I don't know what I'd do without the ability to run and be free. Running reminds me of my strength. Sometimes when you run your mind tells you that you're done and you should stop, but that's a lie – you can always keep going – that's how you get fitter and faster. I think that this is me, I don't give up and that's why I'm strong. I do the same with my studies; if I have a bad test, I don't cry, I quickly find out where I went wrong and I fix it.*

Aviwe was asked to create a model or draw a picture of her world and what helps her overcome difficulties in her world (see Figure 4.5).

**Figure 4.5***Clay Model Resilience: Aviwe*

*This is me and my mom holding up a trophy. The trophy is our achievement. It represents our successes – my academic awards and sport and her university studies. We will both achieve our goals and help one another. I think that's what it's about (life). You cannot do it alone; you need people who love you and support you. For me, that's my mom, I owe her big time. She fixed my dad's mess and made a way for me and x (sister). My grandmother also helps and my uncle. I like being known as someone who achieves and succeeds – that's the person I want to be – that's the person people see me as I think. I think that helps too because I don't want to let them down, I want to succeed. I am motivated to succeed because I know it is possible.*

#### **4.3.1 Observations of Aviwe**

Aviwe presented as a well-groomed adolescent female who appeared to value attention to detail. The badges on her blazer were positioned with care as though measured. She wore a special blazer that had been awarded for academic achievement and I perceived that she wore this blazer with pride as though it were a visual marker of her success. Aviwe appeared confident. She held eye contact, sat with healthy posture, and used her hands to non-verbally add to her verbal accounts. She appeared to plan every answer and took care in thinking about her responses before providing them. She did not appear to show anxiousness and spoke to me in a respectful way.

Aviwe appeared eager to participate in the artefact creation processes. It was observed that she did become critical of her competency for clay modelling – though this was done in a jovial manner. This self-criticism was a unique event in her process as she did not appear to show low confidence outside of the clay modelling context. Aviwe remarked that she was not artistic and that her talents lay more in the academic and sport spheres. My perception was that Aviwe had a firm grasp on what her strengths were and did not appear to hold expectations that she needed to be competent in all domains. However, Aviwe stated that she becomes anxious before "important subject test" like mathematics. When probed she stated that mathematics was a critical subject for the types of future university courses she would like to pursue.

Aviwe spoke well of her mother and maternal uncle. There was a reverence in her tone – a respect. She appeared to hold these individuals in high regard for their capacity to overcome challenges and work toward the goals that would produce success not only for themselves, but for their families too. I perceived that Aviwe did

not believe in making excuses for setbacks. She recounted that accepting responsibility for errors was important to her as this was a means to better oneself and one's skills. I noticed that her favourite running shoes had holes which had been repaired. Her photograph represented a fitting metaphor for how I perceived Aviwe, rather than throwing out the shoes when they encountered adversity, she mended them (and even reinforced the areas where holes were more likely to occur). She did not appear to be one who 'blamed her tools', but rather ensured that her tools were in the best condition possible for her to use.

In triangulating the information obtained from all the various sources the following risk factors could be identified (see Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1**

*Aviwe's Risk Factors*

Risk factors	Examples
1. Challenging social and physical environments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aviwe was abruptly moved from her school and home.</li> <li>- Aviwe described challenges fitting into her new school as other learners would bully her.</li> <li>- Aviwe described struggling to 'fit in' as she had previously come from a higher socio-economic class.</li> <li>- Aviwe's current neighbourhood is described as 'very unsafe' with high levels of crime and gangsterism.</li> <li>- Aviwe has no friends where she lives as many of the girls her age are either sex workers or mothers.</li> <li>- Aviwe is unable to safely pursue her coping strategy of running outside as the area is deemed too dangerous for young women to be alone.</li> <li>- The area in which Aviwe lives has unreliable transport systems that decrease school attendance opportunities.</li> </ul>
2. Specific negative life events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aviwe's parents divorced when she was seven years old.</li> <li>- Aviwe's father abandoned the family and never spoke to her again.</li> <li>- Aviwe's mother fell ill and left her with her grandmother who used corporal punishment as a means to discipline her.</li> <li>- Aviwe was made to leave her favoured school to be placed in a school with significantly few resources.</li> <li>- The COVID-19 pandemic took effect on Aviwe's schoolwork due to lack of access to internet.</li> </ul>
3. Compound socio-demographic risks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aviwe's father contributed to financial difficulties that left the family without finances for schooling and other essential needs.</li> <li>- Aviwe is reliant on a SASSA foster care grant.</li> </ul>

- Aviwe occasionally gets into trouble at school for tardiness due to transport difficulties beyond her control.
4. Biological vulnerabilities.
- There is a maternal history of depression in Aviwe's family. Aviwe also presents with features of achievement anxiety.

By triangulating the various sources of information, Aviwe's resilience enablers could be identified. This is depicted in Table 4.2.

**Table 4.2**

*Aviwe's Resilience Enablers*

Resilience enablers	Examples
1. Personal Enablers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aviwe believes she is strong and capable of pushing beyond pain barrier where others would give up.</li> <li>- Aviwe has strong sporting ability (athlete) which she uses to regulate herself and acquire recognition in her scholastic domain.</li> <li>- Aviwe has shown creative problem-solving to ensure she could continue academic engagement during lockdown.</li> <li>- Aviwe is helpful to teachers which promotes reciprocal help.</li> <li>- Aviwe serves those in authority who then favour her.</li> </ul>
2. Relational enablers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aviwe identified her mother as a source of inspiration. Her mother's endeavour to study a BSc in order to become financially stable to support Aviwe and her siblings is something Aviwe admires.</li> <li>- Aviwe also identified her uncle as a role-player in her life who gives her advice. He is educated and successful – something Aviwe aspires to be.</li> <li>- Aviwe is described as popular and well-liked by her teachers and her peers.</li> </ul>
3. Structural enablers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aviwe receives a SASSA foster care grant to help her grandmother pay for her basic needs.</li> <li>- Aviwe views education as a path to success.</li> <li>- Aviwe's current school has given her a full bursary due to her exemplary academic achievement.</li> <li>- Aviwe's current school has resources that meet her educational needs.</li> </ul>
4. Spiritual/cultural enablers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aviwe's grandmother is actively involved in the local church community.</li> <li>- Aviwe has been attending the church since she was a child and states that her relationship with God is key to her mental well-being.</li> <li>- In Aviwe's culture, it is the role of the patriarch (in this case her uncle) to support the family. Aviwe reports that this 'black tax' has helped her and the family.</li> </ul>

#### 4.4 Case 2: "Bianca's Story"

Bianca is a sixteen-year-old, Grade 10 learner from a local East London school. She was identified by her school-based support team as a suitable candidate for the current study due to her academic achievements despite significant adversity.

Bianca began her schooling at a special education, remedial school in East London. The school catered to learners with special education needs that were not observed as being suitable for mainstream schooling. Most of the children at the school had diagnoses that included attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), specific learning disabilities (SLDs) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) among others. Bianca was diagnosed with ADHD at the age of seven. She was put onto a stimulant medication to help support her concentration which proved to be beneficial. Bianca's mother maintains that Bianca was a challenging child when she was younger and that this played a role in the primary school she attended,

*Bianca was a very busy child; she just couldn't sit still. The doctor told us to put her into a remedial school. She's better now, but very shy, she doesn't talk a lot...she doesn't talk to me. Her dad was like that too – he was always busy and couldn't keep still.*

Bianca recognises that she struggles to focus in the classroom and needs to put in additional efforts to study material, however she also recognises her ADHD as a potential strength. She describes

*Ja, I find it difficult to focus sometimes, but the pills help. It's not all bad, I think my daydreaming helps me think of new things to create, so it has a benefit, I think.*

When Bianca was twelve years old, she returned home from school to find that her mother and sister had packed up and left the home without her. Her father

explained to Bianca that her mother had left him for another man and that Bianca's younger sibling (age six at the time) had moved out with her mother. Bianca's mother later told her that she left Bianca's father as he was abusive. Bianca's mother reported,

*The situation was bad, he (Bianca's father) was abusive toward me, he would scream at me and belittle me, he would also become aggressive. I couldn't handle it. Bianca always got on with her dad, he treated her better than he treated me anyway so I knew she would be safe there. I took x (Bianca's sister) and left. I planned to fetch Bianca but she didn't want to come with me after that.*

Bianca's father reportedly began abusing alcohol and lost his job. Bianca was accepted into a secondary school in East London after achieving high academic results at the remedial school. Her father applied for a reduction in school fees which was granted by the school. He began taking odd jobs to afford basic needs. Bianca described,

*I didn't know at the time why my mom left. My dad told me she met another man and ran off, but my mom told me this year that it was because he was always angry around her. She didn't say goodbye and took my sister and left me... that hurt, it still hurts. It was hard, we had little money.*

Bianca was bullied in her primary school at the time of her mother and sister's departure. She maintains

*the other kids were mean, they didn't like me. I was different. I was always drawing things and daydreaming... they used to put things in my hair and throw breadcrumbs at me – I didn't have friends.*

Despite this, Bianca continued to achieve positive results and received a full scholarship from her current school due to outstanding academic achievement. In Grade 9 she began a relationship with her current boyfriend. Bianca described that her boyfriend has helped her significantly to deal with the challenges she has faced.

*He is definitely my rock; I wasn't doing well emotionally before I met him.*

*We are in the same class actually. He always tells me how talented I am and how smart I am. I don't believe him (laughs) but I like that he thinks that about me – even if I don't think it about myself.*

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced Bianca to work from home. It was at this time that her father became infected with the COVID-19 virus. Bianca recalled traumatically how she heard her father wheezing and when she got to his room he had fallen onto the floor and was unresponsive. She phoned the ambulance but due to what she describes as "language barriers" on the other line, the ambulance arrived three hours after her father had died. She recalls (sobbing)

*I could do nothing. I felt helpless. I still remember the look on his face and how scared he was – that sticks with me.*

Bianca's mother and sister then moved back into the house. She described how this was significantly challenging for her as she was still hurt and angry with her mother for leaving her behind without saying goodbye. She also believes that her sister is favoured because of this.

*I don't really talk to them (mother and sister). I stay in my room or live past them. My sister is like...nothing ever happened. I'm still hurting and angry. I can't wait to leave after school.*

Bianca's mother is currently unemployed, and Bianca and her sister get childcare grants from SASSA. The home is in a high crime area of East London. Bianca's mother relates,

*there are always sirens and always sounds of people fighting, screaming at one another. It's not really safe to go outside – you'll get mugged – or worse...there are gangs, young men causing trouble. But it's where home is, and we make it work.*

Bianca's art teacher describes her as a quiet and shy learner. She reports that Bianca is a talented artist who keeps to herself. She relates that,

*Bianca is a bit of a loner; she only seems to associate with one of the male learners in her class who she is dating. She loves art, I think this is what she uses to process her experiences – she will often ask for scrap materials and left-over paints to take home. She will talk to me about her family situation. I think she really just needs someone to hear her, to know someone listens.*

Bianca described her art teacher as the only teacher she confides in.

*Mrs A? yeah, she is probably the only teacher who knows my name. She takes the time to check in on me – I appreciate that. I think she really cares. I talk to her.*

Bianca's creative sphere is a key area of her life. She described how being part of online communities of other creatives promotes problem-solving and the generation of new ideas.

*I love stop-motion animation. X (boyfriend) got me Sally (character in stop-motion film) because he knows that Nightmare Before Christmas is my favourite movie. I'm on a few Facebook groups and also follow some*

*people on Pinterest and Insta who create the sort of things I like too. I get ideas from them, and I also share my own animations which people seem to like.*

Bianca was asked to take a photograph of something that embodies her ability to achieve academically despite the challenges in her life (see Figure 4.6).

#### **Figure 4.6**

*Photograph of Resilience: Bianca*



*I got this figurine (Sally) from my boyfriend. He bought it for me because he knows I want to be an animator some day and I love Tim Burton movies {I especially love Sally}. I feel like I am her sometimes; like bits of pieces put together. I think she is beautiful though. I also know my boyfriend knows me – who gets someone a weird looking doll for their 6 months'? Someone who really listens and knows you, that's who. I think a big part of*

*my motivation comes from knowing what I want to do (animator) and knowing someone gets me – like knows me, he's my rock.*

*Other people don't get me. I was alone before x (boyfriend), well I kind of isolated myself. He knows what I want to achieve. Sometimes I feel tired, and he reminds me that I have to work hard. I struggle to concentrate, even with my medication. It helps me, but I usually study late at night or early in the morning before school – I don't have the pill then so that's when he (boyfriend) will message me to encourage me to stay with my goals. It doesn't help to dwell on problems otherwise you'll get stuck. I just keep focused on the future and have to believe it will turn out better than this.*

Bianca was asked to create a model or draw a picture of her world and what helps her overcome difficulties in her world (see Figure 4.7).

#### **Figure 4.7**

*Clay Model of Resilience: Bianca*



*This is a camera pointing at me and x (boyfriend). I guess it's like we have this thing where it's our story and we can make it. The camera is about me*

*making animations one day. For now it's about him and me and our story – he helps me and I support him – we do this thing (life) together.*

*I need to do well academically so that I can get a scholarship to Vega School in Cape Town – that's where I want to go. I need to get the best grades I can get to go there because it's too expensive. I got a scholarship for my schooling now, so I think I can get another one if I keep working hard and doing well. If I don't get the scholarship, I'll work for a while and save up. I just know that I want to leave here (East London) and make my own life and home – hopefully with x (boyfriend).*

#### **4.4.1 Observations of Bianca**

My immediate impression of Bianca was one of a shy and timid child. She entered the interview room with caution and appeared anxious. I used the first part of the interview to help Bianca adjust to the environment and contain her anxiety. Bianca insisted that she "always felt shy" when meeting new people. When probed she remarked that she had never really fit in with peers. My perception was that her daydreaming and isolated drawing behaviours tended to contribute both to social exclusion, but also may have developed her creative skills which have become such an important role in her life both for coping and future occupational aspirations. Bianca agreed that this may be the case.

Bianca had difficulty verbally expressing herself. This was most apparent when detailing the ordeals she experienced with her mother abandoning her and her father dying in her presence. Bianca had never received counselling for these events. The interview transitioned into a cathartic process for Bianca. She maintained that she had not spoken to anyone other than her boyfriend about the incidents and that she usually "blocked them out". It first appeared to me that Bianca used this strategy of

avoidance and suppression to cope with psychological pain. However, it became apparent by the second interview that this was not the case. My observation was that Bianca channelled her psychological distress into her art. Rather than suppress the hurt, she worked it into artistic expression. I remarked to Bianca that this seemed to be a strength of hers – turning hurt into something she could have control over, shape and mould. At this point, Bianca remarked that she had never thought about it and was visibly pleased and bashful. She did not appear to have experience receiving compliments. It struck me that Bianca was not the type of child I had envisioned who would be able to overcome such adversity and yet achieve so well – she seemed withdrawn, void of confidence and depressed. Bianca appeared to me to be on the opposite spectrum to Aviwe (a confident, social, and assertive young lady) and yet both were able to achieve academically. Bianca's resilience process appeared vastly dissimilar (this contrast of resilience-building is discussed in the cross-case synthesis section of Chapter 5).

Bianca appeared to perceive herself as a social misfit. She kept to herself and appeared to hold the belief that peers would not find value in her. Her pillar of social support appeared to rest on two individuals; her boyfriend, whom she identified as the salient support in her life, and her art teacher, who motivated her with self-efficacy through artistic expression. Bianca's demeanour was noticeably different when she was engaged in creativity. She enjoyed the clay modelling (partly because she didn't need to talk as much) but also because she recognised that this was *her* domain. It also struck me that Bianca was prepared to explore the boundaries of what she could do artistically. While she was given the colour clay as a medium, she encountered a challenge that this clay was not stable enough to support her film

camera creation. She then took one of the scented sticks from an empty container and began breaking it into pieces that she could use to support her camera.

To me, this process was a fitting analogy for Bianca's resilience. She was able to look beyond what was given to her to solve a problem without compromising her process. At this moment I felt bittersweet. It was this moment that I fully appreciated Bianca's resilience process. Despite the significant difficulties and how these had observably impacted her, she 'found a way to make things work'. This was also reflected in the way she would collect the left-over 'waste' in art class to take home and re-use. I considered that perhaps while it may be considered a risk to place such value in one individual (as Bianca has with her boyfriend), if that individual is a reliable and consistent support, then Bianca would still receive the social protection she needed. Moreover, I recognised that Bianca may have a highly developed skill for identifying those individuals which would best support her and that this meant she only required few social relationships in her life. However, these relationships held significant meaning for her. Bianca appeared to have the capacity to use the energy and motivation she had to channel into highly specific areas that could promote academic resilience.

Triangulation of the various sources of information, revealed Bianca's risk factors depicted in Table 4.3.

**Table 4.3**

*Bianca's Risk Factors*

Risk factors	Examples
1. Challenging social and physical environments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bianca began her schooling at a primary school for learners with special education needs.</li> <li>- Bianca was bullied in her previous school.</li> <li>- Bianca resides in a high crime area of East London.</li> <li>- Bianca currently lives with the mother she perceives abandoned her.</li> <li>- Bianca has no friends besides her boyfriend.</li> </ul>

- |    |                                   |  |
|----|-----------------------------------|--|
| 2. | Specific negative life events.    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bianca's mother and sister left the home without warning or saying goodbye.</li> <li>- Bianca is a victim of peer rejection (bullying) and subsequent low self-concept.</li> <li>- Bianca's father died in her presence whilst the ambulance failed to arrive timeously.</li> <li>- Bianca's mother resumed living in the house without prior communication.</li> </ul> |
| 3. | Compound socio-demographic risks. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bianca lived in a single-parent home with an unemployed parent.</li> <li>- Bianca's father suffered from alcoholism.</li> <li>- Domestic abuse was prevalent in Bianca's early years.</li> <li>- Bianca's family has low socio-economic status.</li> <li>- Bianca's mother is unemployed.</li> </ul>  |
| 4. | Biological vulnerabilities.       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bianca was diagnosed with ADHD which negatively affected her learning and performance processes.</li> </ul>   |

Triangulation of the various sources of information revealed the resilience enablers depicted in Table 4.4.

**Table 4.4**

*Bianca's Resilience Enablers*

Resilience enablers	Examples
1. Personal enablers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bianca identified that she does not give up when she makes mistakes – this perseverance was highlighted as a personal asset.</li> <li>- Bianca identified her creativity (art) as a coping mechanism.</li> <li>- Bianca's belief in her future aspiration as an animator motivates her.</li> <li>- Resourcefulness - Bianca will ask for spare materials to take home and make art</li> </ul>
2. Relational enablers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bianca described that her boyfriend was 'her rock' and that he is an ever-present support in her life.</li> <li>- Bianca's art teacher is described as understanding and supportive of her talents.</li> <li>- Social media interaction</li> </ul>
3. Structural enablers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bianca was given a scholarship from a benefactor connected with her current school.</li> <li>- Bianca views education as a path to success.</li> <li>- Her current school has resources that meet Bianca's educational needs.</li> <li>- Bianca takes a prescribed stimulant medication to support concentration challenges.</li> </ul>
4. Spiritual/cultural enablers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bianca reports that she is not religious but is spiritual. She maintains that her connection with nature and painting landscapes helps her to 'escape'.</li> </ul>

#### 4.5 Case 3: "Claire's Story"

Claire is an eighteen-year-old, Grade 12 learner from a local East London school. She was identified by her school-based support team as a suitable candidate for the current study due to her academic achievements despite significant life challenges.

Claire described that she was an "accident" having been conceived during a one-night stand between her biological father and her mother. Her mother also reportedly smoked cigarettes throughout the pregnancy.

*I wasn't planned. My mother had met this guy at a club when she was seventeen and after a few weeks she found out she was pregnant even though she said she was on the pill (contraceptive). He (biological father) denied that I was his and it took about three years before his parents convinced him to have a blood test because I looked like him.*

Claire's parents did not have a relationship beyond the initial sexual encounter. Claire maintains that she only saw her father on rare occasions and never had a "real relationship" with him. Claire grew up in East London but was raised primarily by her maternal grandmother for the first seven years of her life. She described

*My granny raised me with my mother. But my gran did most of the work.*

*My mom was always going out and leaving me with my gran.*

At the age of seven, Claire's mother met a man, and they were shortly engaged and married. Following this, the new family moved to Cape Town as her new stepfather had secured a job in the Western Cape Province. She indicated

*It was hard for me because I spent most of my life with my gran and she was my safe space. I also had to leave my school and go to a different part of the country where we knew nobody.*

Claire's mother struggled to find a job but finally secured one as a waitress at a local strip club. After some time, Claire described that her mother began stripping for a living as this brought in additional income for the family. Claire's maternal gran with whom she had a strong relationship, died – Claire was unable to go to the funeral. Her mother fell pregnant shortly thereafter and gave birth to twins. This, Claire describes brought much distress to the household as her mother could no longer work and they struggled financially. When the twins turned two, Claire's mother met a man at the strip club and engaged in an affair. Her stepfather discovered this and filed for divorce. Claire was eleven years old at the time. Claire stated

*I have a pattern of men not being around for long in my life. First my dad didn't want me then my stepfather, who I saw as my dad, left and barely called me. My mother's new boyfriend – who became her fiancé after like two months, also treated me badly. I don't trust men.*

Once her mother's fiancé moved in, challenges in Claire's life increased. Her new stepfather-to-be had been caught for stealing money from a drug syndicate and men arrived at the house threatening to murder both Claire and her mother if her mother's fiancé did not return the money. Claire recalled

*they (drug dealers) held a knife to my throat. I thought I was going to die. I remember praying to Jesus to save me. They left and took our car.*

Claire also reported that her mother's fiancé would get drunk and walk around the house naked, swearing at her and exposing her to pornography. Claire's mother's fiancé went on the run and disappeared. Her mother could no longer look after the children and the twins were placed in the care of their biological father. Claire was sent to live with her biological father's parents in East London. Claire stated

*I didn't know them. They were staunch Afrikaans people who were very strict. My father would come visit sometimes.*

Claire was enrolled in Grade 6 at a local Afrikaans medium primary school in East London. She maintained that it was difficult to adjust to the school as she was first language English-speaking. She recounts

*I didn't make any friends. I think people saw me as an outsider.*

Her paternal grandmother states that Claire adapted well to the school despite some initial difficulties. It was decided that she would attend a dual-medium (English-Afrikaans) school in East London for Claire's high schooling. Claire chose to be educated in English and began achieving positive academic results. Claire attributes her motivation for academic engagement to wanting a different life to her mother. She stated

*My mother didn't finish school. She dropped out in Grade 11 when she fell pregnant with me. My mother always complained about how different her life would be if she didn't have kids and had finished school...no woman from my family has ever been to university – I want to be the first.*

Claire further described how women and girls in South Africa are more vulnerable:

*It is more difficult being a woman in this country. You only need to turn on the news to see another woman who's been abused or raped or killed even. We (women) have to be more observant, more careful. I don't think men have to worry about these things as much as we do.*

Her paternal grandmother reports that Claire does not have a healthy relationship with her mother. She indicated

*Claire's mother is a manipulator who has only ever cared about herself.*

*She (Claire's mother) will use guilt to get Claire to do what she wants and only contacts Claire on her terms.*

Regarding her mother, Claire describes

*I love my mom, but she has problems, she doesn't think about how her decisions affect other people.*

Claire described that her most supportive relationship is her girlfriend.

*She (girlfriend) is the person I can trust. She doesn't try to manipulate me or guilt-trip me...I was fourteen when I knew I liked girls, but I was afraid to tell my grandparents – they won't understand. They still don't know. They think she (girlfriend) is just a friend. I don't know if I'll ever tell them, they're too old school and won't approve...The LGBTQ+ community is important to me.*

Claire describes that being part of the online LGBTQ+ community helps her "feel like she belongs". She also has future aspirations to help others in similar situations that she has been:

*I believe in equality and equal rights. I want to be a lawyer when I leave school. I want to help and protect children who went through what I had to go through – especially those who are victims of abuse and discrimination.*

Claire's teacher describes that she is a well-behaved and diligent learner.

*Claire is one of the more dedicated learners in her class. She will ask questions and come to me for help when she doesn't understand...she is probably the only one who asks for past exam papers to work through.*

Moreover, her teacher relates that

*Claire is involved at the school; she is on the SRC (student representative council) and is a peer promoter (a learner who assists other learners to seek help when needed).*

Claire maintains that she has become more disciplined with her studies and identified that while she does not like how strict her grandparents are, she reports that it was their influence which helped create the routine for her. She describes

*I didn't really know how to study before I came to East London. I would just read over stuff. My mother didn't check my homework or pressure me to study. Here (with grandparents) I have specific study times where I study and am not allowed to go out. They (grandparents) also said that if I get accepted into university for law, they will pay for me to attend university – this motivates me because it means I can have a better life.*

Additionally, Claire describes how she needs to study in a way that benefits her the most.

*I used to read over work and then just recall it for exams. When I got to Grade 9 this didn't work as well because I also needed to understand so I got creative with my studying. I use white board markers and write on my glass sliding door – I draw diagrams and create mind maps. I know that if I can see how ideas relate then I can make sense of them, so this is how I study now.*

Claire sees a state-employed psychologist at the local hospital following diagnosis of depression dating back to 2020. She is also taking psychotropic support (SSRI). Her teacher heading up the peer promoters is also identified as a supportive adult in Claire's life whom she respects. Her paternal grandparents also receive a foster care grant which is used to cover her school fees.

Claire was asked to take a photograph of something that embodies her ability to achieve academically despite the challenges in her life (see Figure 4.8).

**Figure 4.8**

*Photograph of Resilience: Claire*



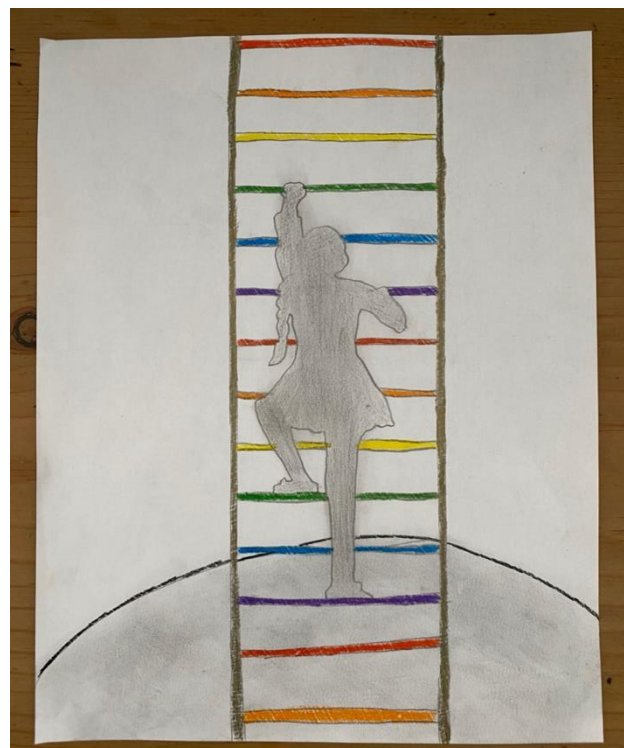
*This symbol is important to me (LGBTQ+ flag). When I first thought that I might be gay I was afraid because I believed people would reject me and bully me. I already used to get bullied because we were poor, and I didn't have the things other girls my age had – things like the clothes and the hair and the shoes. So this was something that took me a while to get the courage to tell people – even though I haven't told ouma and oupa (grandparents). They are the only people who don't know. I think being part of a community of people who are oppressed and knowing I'm not alone and I'm not a social outcast has changed me for the better. I'm more confident in who I am. It makes me feel unashamed. It also motivates me to help fight for the rights and safety of vulnerable people. That's why I want to be a lawyer so that I can help change things like policy and a*

*general understanding of people with differences as well as the system that doesn't protect minorities and women. My girlfriend helps me a lot. She helped me to see that I wasn't a weirdo and that my sexuality and identity were something to embrace and be proud of rather than ashamed of. Being part of this community helps me feel proud. I am living an authentic life now, so I feel free to be a part of things without having to hide.*

Claire was asked to create a model or draw a picture of her world and what helps her overcome difficulties in her world (see Figure 4.9).

#### **Figure 4.9**

*Drawing of Resilience: Claire*



*I decided to draw this picture of a girl climbing out of a dark space. The steps on the ladder are like her supports – her community, her people. For me, if I was this girl, my steps would be colourful like this. The people I like are ‘colourful’ they're ‘different’ but they're there for me when I need them*

*and they don't judge me because they know what it's like to be judged. I have friends all over the world that I speak to online. My ladder is my identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. This motivates me to climb to higher heights and represent. I want to leave my darker past behind and go into a bright and colourful future. I want to be the first woman in my family to go to university. That's important to me because I'm also a feminist. I think things are harder when you're a woman, and even more difficult when you're a gay woman, so I have to work harder to climb higher because the world doesn't make it easy for us (gay women). My peer promoter head is very supportive, she is also a gay woman and isn't afraid to voice her opinions on issues in the school.*

#### **4.5.1 Observations of Claire**

Claire presented as an extraverted and confident young woman. She entered the interview room with a beaming smile and her verbal and non-verbal communication appeared to add additional emphasis to the content of her narrative. It appeared to me that Claire put effort into her appearance to add vibrance and colour to her overall aesthetic. I considered whether her school permitted the extraverted accessories that included multiple ear piercings, a blue streak in her hair and an LGBTQ+ flag badge on her blazer lapel. My overall impression was that Claire had an “accept me for who I am or go” script. She did not have much tolerance for intolerant people which she identified as chauvinists, bigots, racists or transphobic. Claire communicated that she had spent a considerable part of her life trying to fit into the expectations of what she thought others would prefer her to be. She appeared to be actively rebelling against that idea currently.

Her identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community was a dominant theme in her narrative. Claire appeared to identify this as a significant pillar of support in her life. I reflected with Claire that being a target of bullying when she was younger appeared to have some parallel with her identification with a marginalised group. Claire maintained that this did play a role as her experience of being bullied developed her empathy for vulnerable others. Claire identified empathy as a salient strength of hers. She did appear to be an individual who prioritised the well-being of others. Claire was a member of multiple social support groups at school that included the student representative council and peer promotor.

It struck me that Claire focused on structure and systemic issues as a target for change. She appeared to be motivated to achieve academically both as a representative of a perceived marginalised community, but also to help her achieve her goal of being accepted into a tertiary law degree.

Claire did not appear to speak positively of her mother or paternal grandparents. She seemed to perceive both as attempting to control her. Her mother reportedly used manipulation and "guilt-tripping" as a strategy to bend Claire to her will, while her grandparents controlled through regimental rules and strict boundaries. Claire appeared to resist control as well as conforming to the rules of others – this was apparent in her liberal use of aesthetic trinkets integrated with her school uniform and the blue streak in her hair. I perceive that Claire actively resists conformity and reflected that I thought this may be associated with her self-reported challenges with "fitting in". I told Claire that some individuals may seek to change themselves to fit into an environment whilst others may seek to change the environment. Claire reported that changing the environment resonated with her and that this was what

she aims to do. Claire has already had a hand in school uniform policy (option to wear pants instead of gyms) which she stated helped girls feel more comfortable.

Claire appeared to take strength from her ideology of fighting for the rights of the marginalised and disenfranchised. This appeared to give her meaning and motivation to lead. My perception was that Claire's drive to find validation through her identity with social justice may be a means of overcoming the validation deficits from parental figures. Claire acknowledged that the teacher in charge of the peer promoter group is a strong advocate for social justice and has served as a role model for her.

Both of Claire's artefacts involved the importance of the LGBTQ+ community. Her drawing of a girl climbing out of darkness on multi-coloured rungs that represented the rainbow symbols of the LGBTQ+ community was insightful. She appeared to attribute her rise and motivation to academically succeed to her association with the values and meaning of the LGBTQ+ culture. A secondary motivator included that she desired a better life than the one her mother leads. Claire appeared to be disappointed in her mother's choices and how these negatively affected her. This dynamic seemed to correlate with Claire's intentions to make decisions (at policy level) to promote positive outcomes for others. In some way it appeared that Claire wished to position herself in a way that could help children like her.

Triangulation of the various sources of information, revealed Claire's risk factors depicted in Table 4.5.

**Table 4.5**

*Claire's Risk Factors*

Risk factors	Example
1. Challenging social and physical environments.	- Claire was relocated to a different province and removed from the care of her maternal grandmother (mother figure).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Claire experienced challenges related to her mother's profession as an exotic dancer and how this contributed to domestic discord in the family home.</li> <li>- Abuse within the home from her mother's fiancé.</li> <li>- Claire was placed in a school for two years where she barely spoke the language of instruction.</li> <li>- Lack of perceived supportive parental figures.</li> </ul>
2. Specific negative life events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Claire was a product of teenage pregnancy.</li> <li>- She had a negative relationship with her mother and was raised in her formative years by her maternal grandmother.</li> <li>- Claire was accosted by drug-dealers who threatened her life.</li> <li>- She was a victim of peer rejection (bullying).</li> <li>- Claire was separated from her half-siblings with little notice.</li> <li>- She was placed in the care of paternal grandparents – strangers to her.</li> <li>- Parent's divorce and subsequent abuse from mother's fiancé that included psychological abuse, exposure to pornographic material and sexualised behaviours.</li> <li>- The negative effects on her education brought about by limited interaction with school due to COVID-19 lockdown.</li> </ul>
3. Compound socio-demographic risks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Claire experienced severe financial challenges when her mother could no longer support her and her half siblings.</li> <li>- Unemployed parent.</li> <li>- Vulnerability and risk of rejection due to identification as a gay female adolescent at school.</li> <li>- Perceived repeated rejection/abandonment from male figures in her life.</li> </ul>
4. Biological vulnerabilities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Claire has been diagnosed with depression.</li> <li>- Product of teenage pregnancy which could have led to certain biological vulnerabilities due to possible maternal stress.</li> <li>- Claire's mother smoked during her pregnancy.</li> <li>- Sexual orientation may be the result of a genetic predisposition.</li> </ul>

Triangulation of the various sources of information revealed the resilience enablers for Claire.

**Table 4.6**

*Claire's Resilience Enablers*

Resilience enablers	Example
1. Personal enablers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Claire has leadership qualities that had her elected into the SRC at her school.</li> <li>- Claire is an intelligent and conscientious learner (requests past exam papers).</li> <li>- She is assertive and interacts confidently with others.</li> <li>- Claire's aspirations of a better future (positive outlook) as an attorney at law.</li> </ul>
2. Relational enablers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Claire described that her girlfriend is her main support person.</li> <li>- Claire's peer promoter head is an adult role model she respects.</li> </ul>

- Claire's online friendships in the LGBTQ+ community.
  - Her grandparents establish clear routine and structure for academic studying at home.
  - Maternal grandmother provided a "safe space" during her early years.
3. Structural enablers.
- Claire is an active member of her SRC and Peer Promoter groups at school.
  - Claire receives a foster care grant from SASSA.
  - She sees education as a path to success.
  - Her current school has resources that meet her educational needs.
  - She takes a prescribed SSRI medication to support emotional/mood challenges.
  - She sees a state psychologist for individual therapy
  - Claire's school provides a reduction in school fees.
4. Spiritual/cultural enablers.
- Claire describes her LGBTQ+ community as a 'culture' in which values of acceptance, empathy and tolerance are key.
- 

#### 4.6 Case 4: "Dinga's Story"

Dinga is a seventeen-year-old, Grade 11 learner from a local East London school. She was identified by her school-based support team as a suitable candidate for the present study due to her academic achievements in spite of significant life challenges.

Dinga's mother reportedly did not know she was pregnant until her sixth month of pregnancy. Dinga was born with a condition called physiologic genu varum (bowleggedness). Her mother reportedly did not know about the condition or corrective procedures. Dinga grew up in an informal settlement outside East London. She was left in the care of her grandmother when her mother went into the suburb to work. Her mother is a domestic worker. When Dinga was six years old, she moved with her mother to reside at the residence of her mother's employer. They lived in a domestic flat on the property. Dinga described that her mother's employers ensured that she was enrolled in a well-resourced mainstream primary school. This change of schooling environment was significant according to Dinga:

*It (the move to a new school) was a big change. I went from an informal type playschool in the township with fifty-odd kids to a classroom with twenty-five or so learners. I didn't speak English very well and had to adjust quickly. Children would also stare at me because of my legs – especially older children.*

Dinga attributes much of her adjustment to the way in which she was socially included by the children of her mother's employer. She describes

*They are like family to me. They are all out of school at university now, but when I was younger they would let me play with them and I learned a lot from them.*

Dinga has never met her father; he had moved to Johannesburg and his own family lost contact with him before Dinga was born. Her paternal family however have been involved in Dinga's life. Dinga will visit them in the rural areas during school holidays. She states:

*It is a very different world there (in the rural areas) especially for girls. The culture is different compared to here (suburban area). I will go there and spend most of the time with the women. They teach me about my heritage, about community and Ubuntu. It was there that I learned to play the keyboard...we would go to church for most of the day and I have always loved the music there – it's vibrant and joyful. I love church and my relationship with God. Prayer is important to me; it helps me connect with God. I play in the music team there now, it's a lot of fun.*

Dinga has been playing the piano and keyboard for six years. She also sings and has received awards at eisteddfods for both. Her music teacher describes

*Dinga is very talented. She received her colours for music last year after a series of excellent performances and reaching grade 8 in piano. Few learners have the dedication to their craft that she has... as a music teacher, I can see which students have practiced and which students coast by. Dinga works on her scales every day, her passion for music is tangible. I like to encourage her; I want her to succeed.*

Dinga reflected that she receives much encouragement and support from her music teacher.

*She (music teacher) is kind. She has always given me encouragement. I feel like she gives me special attention, like she sees potential in me and wants me to succeed. We talk about all kinds of things; she is the one who told me that I have a gift and that I can go places with my music. If I'm having a tough day at school, Mrs J is the person I will seek out.*

Dinga's mother passed away from COVID-19 in 2020. She reportedly had a history of pneumonia which increased her vulnerability. Dinga, who was in Grade 9 at the time, chose to remain in the care of the 'Smith' family. She moved out of the domestic flatlet and was given a bedroom in the main house. In 2021 the Dinga was formally placed in the foster care of the Smiths. Dinga recalls

*It shook me to my core. I never imagined that my mom would die – I hadn't considered it. She went to the hospital and didn't come back... I wasn't even allowed to go see her. I didn't say goodbye. I remember laying on my bed listening to music and they (Smith parents) came in. Mrs Smith was quiet and I could see she'd been crying. Dad (Mr Smith) then told me that my mom passed away.*

Mr Smith reports that it was an easy decision to accommodate Dinga. He states:

*We were all shocked when her mother died. She'd been with us for about eight or nine years with Dinga. Dinga has grown up with our kids, she's been like a second daughter to us. We didn't hesitate to ask Dinga if she wanted to stay with us.*

Regarding Dinga's strengths, Mr Smith described

*She works hard. She always has. We converted the flatlet outside into a study and music room for her because that's what she loves to do – she studies and she practices. I think that Dinga is the sort of person who doesn't settle, she pushes herself, but also she isn't quick to criticise herself when things don't go as planned. She will sit and reflect and then she will come to us and tell us what she plans to do – she is mature like that.*

Dinga described that she was both thankful and happy to live with the Smith family. Moreover, she described that Mr Smith was a role model for her as he

*is a lifelong learner... has always studied and probably will always study... he always wants to enrich himself with knowledge. That's a goal for me.*

She further acknowledged her paternal family support in the rural areas.

*I live in two worlds. I have two families. They are both very different, but they are similar in the ways that matter – they both communicate love and support.*

Dinga was unable to meaningfully take part in physical activities at school and has been a victim of peer rejection due to her physiological difference. On her disability, Dinga reported

*I can't run like other people and I was obviously not the first person picked for teams (laughs). I figured that I needed to find other areas to be valuable – I wanted to excel academically, my music was something I think I improved at because maybe I didn't have to do sports at school (which was compulsory).*

Dinga focused on her academic and music spheres. She selected music as an academic subject for her FET phase and declared that she wished to continue studying music at Rhodes University after she matriculates. In discussing her future aspirations, Dinga described,

*Well obviously I want to become a professional body-builder (laughs). No, I will definitely study music – I am sure. I know that a lot of people in my grade have no clue what they want to do but I've known since I was in primary school. I think that knowing that I have the opportunity to study something like music, which I love, motivates me. I look forward to the day when I can get paid to do something I love.*

Dinga was awarded a tuition bursary at her school. Her foster parents have also set up an education plan fund so that Dinga can attend a tertiary institution after her secondary schooling. Dinga was asked to take a photograph of something that embodies her ability to achieve academically despite the challenges in her life (see Figure 4.10).

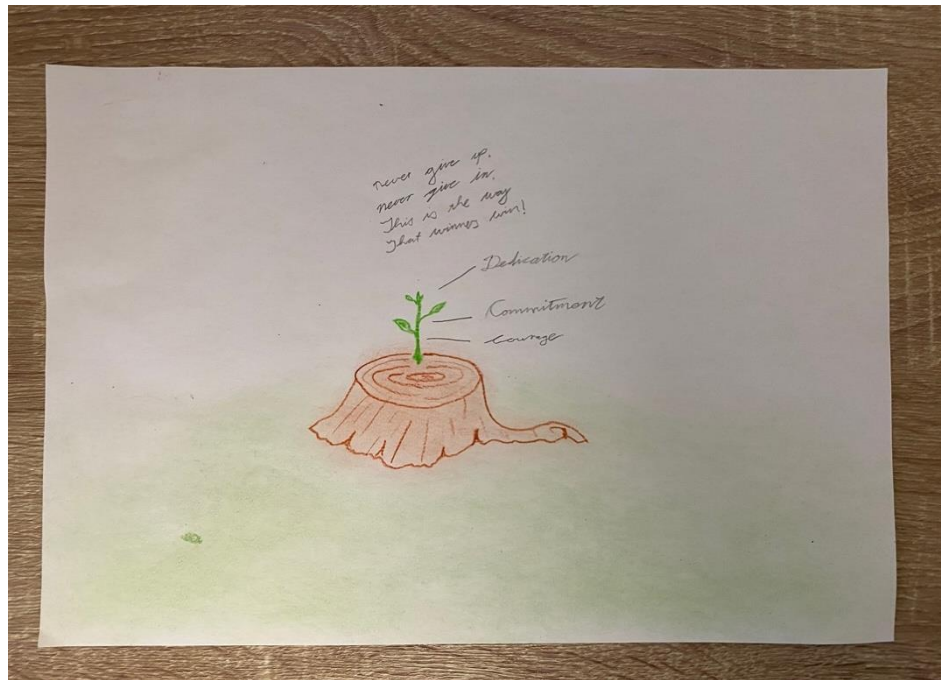
**Figure 4.10***Photograph of Resilience: Dinga*

*I took a photo of my keyboard because to me, this is everything. Music is how I express myself; it is what I do to get me through difficult times and it makes me happy. I got this as a Christmas gift from the Smiths when I was in Grade 7. It's even more special because my mom also contributed money to buy it – she wanted to be a part of it and that is love. I think music is a place someone can escape to when life is overwhelming. I have probably spent thousands of hours playing this keyboard. I remember when I first started playing, I was so excited, but my fingers wouldn't do what my brain told them to do – it was frustrating. After some time and effort, I improved, but it didn't get easier. Music is like that, the better you get, the more there is for you to learn – it never stops. I think it only gets easier when you stop learning because then you're happy with where you are. I want to see how far I can go.*

Dinga was asked to create a model or draw a picture of her world and what helps her overcome difficulties in her world (see Figure 4.11).

**Figure 4.11**

*Drawing of Resilience: Dinga*



*We had this tree in the back yard that Mr Smith cut down because it gave too much shade. But it kept producing these new green shoots. It was like the tree refused to die. It used to annoy Mr Smith, but I thought it was funny. It became like the running joke, “guess who's back?” I think I admired that tree because despite being cut down, it kept coming back. I drew this and also wrote a little tag – “never give up, never give in, this is the way that winners win”. I think it takes commitment, dedication, and courage to keep going when it seems all is lost. This is resilience to me – not giving up, to find a way, even when it appears there's no hope and*

*others think you're done for. The funny thing is that Mr Smith eventually gave up and the tree is about two meters tall now – I think he secretly respects the tree.*

#### **4.6.1 Observations of Dinga**

Dinga's physical challenges are immediately apparent. Her legs are bowed, and she walks with a metronomic gait. However, any focus on her disability is short-lived because I found myself redirected to a very broad and attractive smile. This was my first observation of Dinga's resilience. I shared with her that I perceived her engaging smile and openness may be a strategy for facilitating the comfort of others who may experience awkwardness or uncertainty over how to treat her given the disability. Dinga described that people have always looked at her differently and she learned years ago that if people perceived that she wasn't worried about her disability, then they wouldn't need to either. I perceived this strategy as a relational resilience enabler – Dinga appeared to adapt her social interactions to accommodate others to her difference. I experienced a sense of comfort being in her presence, it was as though her physical differences were a moot point.

Another aspect that I found endearing about Dinga is her sense of humour. Dinga appeared to enjoy a laugh and would also make jokes at her own expense – this strategy also seemed to be aimed at reassuring others. My impression is that some might be tentative in their dealing with a person with disability. My own experience is one of not knowing whether to acknowledge the difficulties head on or dismiss the disability as though it doesn't exist in an effort to perceivably help the other person with disability feel more comfortable in my presence. Dinga seemed fundamentally aware that her difference might affect people in this way and so she seemed to facilitate the interaction in a way that helped others feel comfortable in her presence.

Dinga attributed much of her coping to music. I too have a passion for music and play a number of instruments albeit not the piano. I was able to connect with Dinga easily on this level, conversing about musical tastes, practicing scales, and discussing how playing music had a therapeutic benefit. Dinga's eyes appeared to light up as though she had met a kindred spirit. She described how music had compensated for her limited ability to take part in physical activities. She related how at a young age she would watch the other girls play jump rope in the township and she would sit and experience a disconnect from what other children her age were doing. This changed for Dinga when she encountered music at church. She was able to immediately recognise that this was something she could do – her hands are functional, and one can sit whilst playing. While other children were running about, climbing trees, and playing games, Dinga was visiting the church choir master where she would sing and learn the piano. Dinga had achieved her grade 8 level for piano in only four years, something her music teacher indicated took most learners six to eight years to achieve. This commitment to mastering crafts within her range of ability also extended to her academics. Dinga did not have the academic foundation that other children her age had. Many children in her primary school had progressed through educare facilities that fed the primary school and had learned basic concepts of math and literacy by age six. Dinga barely spoke English and had little to no academic background. Yet despite this late start, she had achieved in the top 10 of her grade by age 11 and is currently 3<sup>rd</sup> in her grade.

Dinga chose to stay with the Smiths instead of going to the rural areas after her mother died. Dinga reported that she was very close to her mother. Dinga most admired her mother's strength and dedication in helping Dinga achieve. Dinga communicated that her mother had no formal education but knew that education was

Dinga's ticket to future success. Dinga reported that her mother encouraged her to interact as much as possible with the Smith children so that she could learn from them. Dinga's mother appeared to teach Dinga how to identify and secure supports to help her develop skills.

Dinga is a popular learner at school. Her teacher described that she is well-liked. This had not always been the case as Dinga had been teased and excluded from peer activities as a child. Rather than allow this to set the precedent and inform unhelpful beliefs for her relationships with peers, Dinga was able to contextualise the exclusions and sought instead to find ways to be included – such as excelling academically and musically and presenting a friendly and positive demeanour.

Dinga expressed gratitude to the Smith family for taking her in. She further reflected that she felt included and a part of the family. She described a genuine belief that the Smiths cared about her, and her aspirations for the future included their presence. Similarly, Dinga was able to integrate the more western cultural elements of her school and the Smith family with her paternal family in the indigenous, isiXhosa culture. I experienced that Dinga did not see one as being more valuable than the other as she spoke about both cultures with a respect and appreciation for what they embodied. Dinga described herself as an "Anglo-Xhosa princess". A term she used to define the way she adopted the strengths of both worldviews. Dinga valued the Western view of women as independent and capable while she also valued the *Ubuntu* community way of life within her Xhosa culture. For me, this integration of cultural values reflected the philosophical orientation of the study – constructive realism. Dinga's ability to value both worldviews of European and Xhosa cultures showed how synthesis is possible.

Triangulation of the various sources of information, revealed Dinga's risk factors depicted in Table 4.7.

**Table 4.7**

*Dinga's Risk Factors*

Risk factors	Examples
1. Challenging social and physical environments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dinga spent her formative years in a low-resourced township area.</li> <li>- She was exposed to safety issues around sanitation and open electricity boxes in the township.</li> <li>- Dinga moved to an English-speaking school having little command of the language.</li> <li>- Dinga had very few friends early in her life as she could not play the types of games other children her age did.</li> <li>- The creche she attended had over 50 children with one teacher supervising.</li> <li>- She is required to navigate a series of stairs at her school which affects arrival to class, as well as physical discomfort.</li> </ul>
2. Specific negative life events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dinga's mother died from COVID-19 when she was fifteen years old.</li> <li>- Dinga was unable to attend her music classes or church during COVID-19 lockdown – both activities represented significant supports for her which she no longer had available to her.</li> </ul>
3. Compound socio-demographic risks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dinga was born with a disability that was not corrected. Her disability status affected her social interactions and participation in social activities and sport. Her limited ability to exercise has risks for her health.</li> <li>- Dinga's father was never present in her life.</li> <li>- Dinga's mother was uneducated and employed as a domestic worker.</li> <li>- Dinga spent much of her time with her grandmother as her mother needed to travel a far distance to work.</li> </ul>
4. Biological vulnerabilities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dinga's mother did not know she was pregnant until six months gestation. She did not take folic acid supplementation and reportedly drank alcohol up to six months gestation.</li> <li>- Dinga was born with physiologic genu varum (bowleggedness), which could be caused, amongst others, by genetic influences, vitamin D and calcium deficiencies.</li> </ul>

Triangulation of the various sources of information revealed the resilience enablers depicted in Table 4.8.

**Table 4.8***Dinga's Resilience Enablers*

Resilience enablers		Examples
1.	Personal enablers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dinga is described as committed and dedicated.</li> <li>- Dinga reported that she does not give up.</li> <li>- Her sense of humour is a coping skill.</li> <li>- She has good social skills.</li> <li>- She is intelligent.</li> <li>- She is a highly competent musician, using music as a coping skill.</li> </ul>
2.	Relational enablers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Smith family welcomed her into their home after her mother's death.</li> <li>- Dinga continues to visit her paternal family in the rural areas whom she describes as supportive.</li> <li>- She socialised often with the Smith's children, learning from them.</li> <li>- Her music teacher encourages her to develop her musical talents.</li> <li>- Dinga is reportedly well-liked by her peers and is popular.</li> </ul>
3.	Structural enablers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- She has attended well-resourced primary and secondary schools.</li> <li>- She views education as a path to success.</li> <li>- She received a fee waiver bursary for her academic achievements in high school.</li> <li>- Eisteddfod participation and recognition of her skills was rewarded at school.</li> <li>- She is a beneficiary of a foster care grant from SASSA.</li> <li>- Supportive church and music team.</li> </ul>
4.	Spiritual/cultural enablers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dinga integrates both the western and indigenous cultural values into her identity.</li> <li>- She actively participates in her church and describes herself as religious. She describes that prayer is an important aspect in her life.</li> </ul>

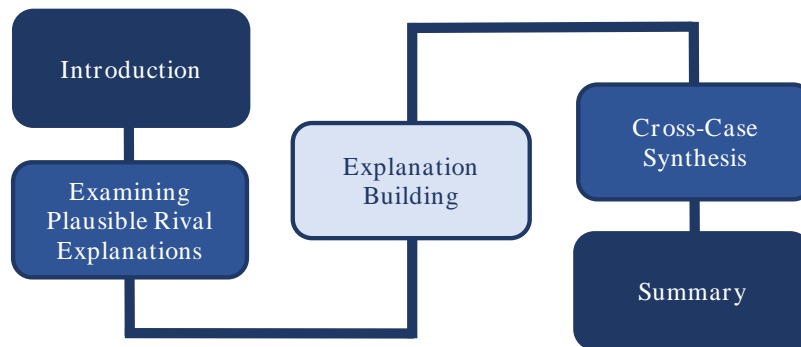
**4.7 Summary**

This chapter has discussed the initial phase of the data analysis. The process involved providing a descriptive narrative for each case within a time-series chronological order of events. The inclusion of these events was contingent on association with the theoretical propositions of the study. Thereafter, the collateral information and artefacts created by the participants were introduced to add additional layering and detail to the resilience aspects. My observations and

impressions were then introduced followed by triangulation of the data from multiple sources into a categorical depiction of the risk factors experienced by the participants, as well as the resilience enablers used by the individuals in their resilience processes. This phase sets the foundation for the explanation-building phase of the analysis in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS: EXPLANATORY DATA



#### 5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the data were described narratively and gleaned from the predetermined theoretical propositions for the study. According to Yin (2018), case studies whose explanations reflect theoretically significant propositions are of greater interest than vague narratives that do not resonate with theory. This analysis phase triangulated the data to create themes associated with lived experiences of risk and resilience.

In this chapter, an explanation-building process is undertaken to explain how the children fostered academic resilience within the proposition framework of SERT. Consequently, the analytical analysis aims to build on the SERT theory by explaining how children at risk for adverse outcomes were able to identify, navigate toward and negotiate for resources and support within their social ecologies.

After exploring various opinions on the explanatory analysis of case studies (e.g., Haverland & Blatter, 2014; George & Merkus, 2022), I contend with Yin's (2018) assertion that "the explanation-building process has not been well documented in

operational terms" (p. 230). According to Zainal (2007), explanatory case studies examine the data closely at a surface and deep level to explain the phenomena. Explanation-building is regarded as an iterative process and gradually builds during the process as the researcher explores causal explanations for *how* or *why* a specific phenomenon occurs (Mishra, 2021; Yin, 2018).

Thus Yin's (2018) explanation-building strategy is employed whereby the explanatory proposition (SERT) is compared to the case study data. An essential component of the explanation-building analysis is to consider plausible rival explanations. This consideration of rival hypotheses is the first step in the current research. The second step involves explaining the data deductively according to the theoretical propositions of SERT. The analysis phase then concludes with a cross-case synthesis in which the individual case data are compared with the other cases.

## **5.2 Examining Plausible Rival Explanations**

Before comparing the case study data to the theoretical propositions, the researcher needs to consider whether the case study data can be explained by means other than the predicted hypotheses for the study. This strategy needed to be a continuous approach throughout the research process. The rival explanations are recorded in Table 5.1

**Table 5.1***Rival Explanations*

Phenomenon	Proposition	Rival proposition
Adversity	Participants had lived experiences of significant adversity that would be expected to affect outcomes negatively.	The adversity experienced by participants could be considered typical challenges that would likely not affect outcomes.
Academic resilience	Participants achieve academically despite adversity due to transactions with resilience enablers.	Academic achievement may be influenced by processes other than those identified as resilience enablers (e.g., cheating, low academic standard of school, biased educators).
The social ecology of resilience	Resilience is a process whereby children and their social ecologies co-facilitate.	Resilience is a process that is not co-facilitated (e.g., it is either facilitated by the individual or the social ecology).

A vital step in the study was to ensure that each case met the criteria for what would constitute the bounded system. Two salient factors included how adversity and academic resilience would be determined as valid and credible study phenomena. The entire study would be compromised if even one of these phenomena were ambiguous. Thus, meticulous care was taken to establish the bounded system comprising an academically resilient learner. Additionally, the salient proposition is *how* these learners foster academic resilience. The theoretical proposition is based on the social ecology of resilience framework (SERT), which is central to conceptualising academic resilience.

### **5.2.1 Rival Explanation of Adversity**

The work of Van Rensburg et al. (2015) established four categories of adversity based on a decade's review of South African research in the field of resilience and adversity. Thus, adversity represented more than a conceptual definition but empirically identified categories against which data could be compared. Potential participants were screened according to these criteria, and only those who met the

criteria in full were selected. This approach reduced the subjectivity in adversity and delineated adversity from typical day-to-day challenges that children face in their environments. By comparing the case study data to this proposition of adversity, credibility was ensured by which all the individual cases could be objectively identified as children who have experienced significant adversity that would be expected to elicit adverse outcomes academically.

### **5.2.2 Rival Explanation of Academic Resilience**

Academic resilience is both the presence of significant adversity and academic achievement. Thus, even if participants were identified as having experienced significant adversity, it would need to be clear that they had also academically achieved where others may fail. Academic achievement requires that a learner meets the academic criteria to successfully pass the outcomes for the grade. However, the possibility exists that a learner's academic achievement has not been *achieved*. For example, a learner may cheat to obtain a good grade, or a teacher may favour a learner to the extent of increasing a learner's result. Schools may also use non-standardised approaches to measure academic achievement, which is not aligned with a national or provincial standard. In order to control for this, the researcher acquired academic data from multiple sources for three years. Moreover, academic data was taken from the schools' internal and external provincial results (e.g., Annual National Assessments). These results could be compared to ensure consistency and remove possible teacher bias. Moreover, the participants in the current study had all achieved university entrance results.

### **5.2.3 Rival Explanation for Social Ecology of Resilience**

The salient theoretical proposition of the present study advocates that children who overcome significant adversity to achieve better-than-expected academic

outcomes comprise a process of co-facilitating resilience enablers from both the child and their social ecologies. This co-facilitation of resources and support is essential for the conceptualisation of resilience. If children achieve academically despite adversity without facilitation from their social ecologies, then resilience would constitute an individual trait (see early definitions of resilience) rather than a transactional process. Secondly, if children achieve academically despite significant adversity without agency, then resilience would constitute the extent to which structures and environments support the individual – who could be described as a passive recipient of support rather than one who actively took part in the process. The first explanation could suggest that resilience is a personal strength, much like hardiness or grit. In contrast, the second explanation emphasises the external structures of society to promote resilience, thereby removing responsibility from the person. Masten (2014) maintains that SERT contrasts with person-focused explanations of resilience that place responsibility on the person to be resilient.

In the current study, Van Breda and Theron's (2018) review of a decade of local empirical resilience literature identified four categories of resilience enablers. These categories included active and receptive transactions between the child and their social ecologies. Thus, the four participant's resilience enablers were compared to these categories and found to be a co-facilitation between child and social ecology.

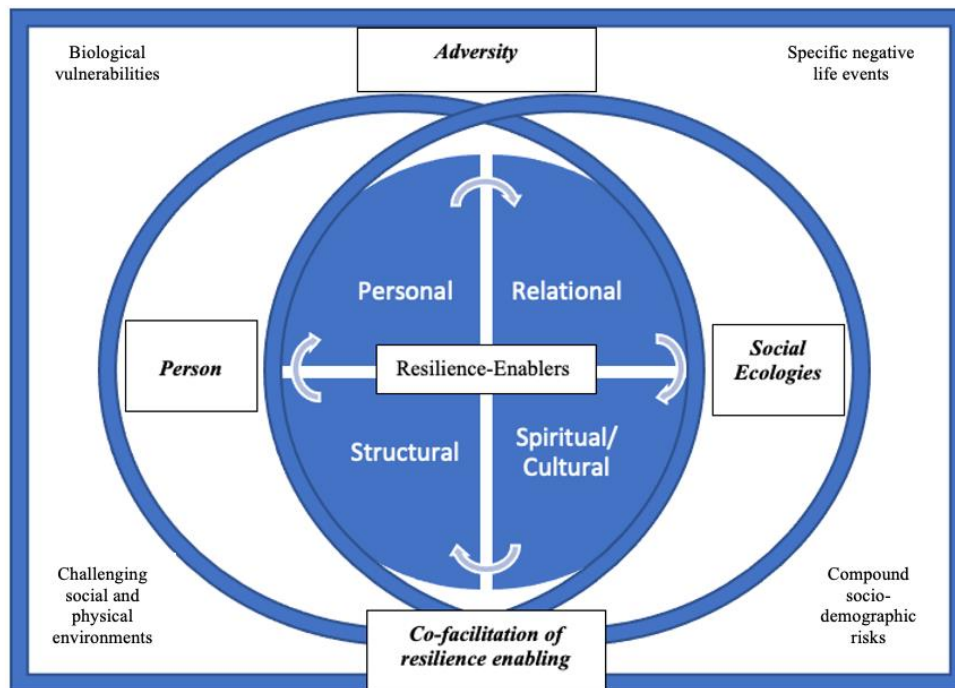
### **5.3 Explanation Building**

According to Yin (2018), explanation-building results from a series of iterations beginning with the theoretical statement. After that, the data collected is compared to the theoretical statement. The multiple cases facilitate repetitions of the theoretical propositions. As the case study evidence is examined, explanatory propositions can be revised, and the data examined once again from a new perspective. The guiding

theoretical proposition for this research states that academically resilient children co-facilitate resilience enablers between themselves and their social ecologies to overcome significant adversity. These co-facilitated transactions regard the capacities of personal, relational, structural, and spiritual/cultural protective mechanisms within the unique social context of the child. Ungar (2015) asserts that resilience is projected by the person's capacity collaborating with the social and physical ecologies to facilitate culturally meaningful coping.

This statement explains the proposition of the current study that both the individual and their social ecologies are responsible for academic resilience. The explanation-building analysis is linked to comparing the case data to the study's propositions – specifically, the interchange between the individuals and their social ecologies through resilience enablers.

This process enabled me to expand on Ungar's existing social-ecology resilience model by including van Breda and Theron's (2018) depiction of the four categories of social ecologies and Van Rensburg et al.'s (2015) four categories of adversity to develop a model of the social-ecological resilience process for academic resilience. This model is depicted in Figure 5.1. It explains how children and their social ecologies co-facilitate support and resources to foster academic achievement despite adversity. The model illustrates that the co-facilitation of resilience enablers (personal, relational, structural, and spiritual/cultural) occurs within the context of adversity (biological vulnerability, specific negative life events, challenging social and physical environments and compound socio-demographic risks). The capacity of the person and the capacity of their social ecologies capacity to facilitate resilience-enablers buffer the adversity and promote resilient outcomes.

**Figure 5.1***Model of SERT for Academic Resilience*

### 5.3.1 Aviwe's Social-ecological Resilience-building Process

**5.3.1.1 Aviwe's Personal Enablers of Resilience.** Aviwe's personal resilience enablers included that she is a confident learner who perceives herself as pushing forward when others might give up. This agency and self-belief in her strengths are crucial to her perseverance as they allow her to continue accessing resources whilst others have given in. She recognises the benefit of outlasting others as this promotes additional rewards. Aviwe is not one to shy away from challenges and does not allow setbacks to derail her progress toward achieving her goals. She can frame setbacks as opportunities to move forward. This attitude translates to her sporting prowess as a very competent runner. Running can be described as both mental and physical exercise. The temptation to "give up" when one tires are ever-present. However, Aviwe believes that pushing past these barriers promotes

additional fitness, which helps her endure times of hardship – both on the road and in life; therefore, both physical and psychological fitness. In this way, Aviwe created meaning from her adversity – she saw adversity as the context for gleaning skills. She is further able to recognise those resources that serve her achievement aims.

Aviwe has hope for the future. She aims to study at a tertiary level and become a qualified professional (BSc). Despite a history of hardship, Aviwe continues to perceive that a positive future is in store for her. This optimism appears to buffer the difficulties she experiences in the present because the reward awaits her in the future. Others may be likely to extrapolate negative experiences in the present as echoing into the future, which can diminish hope and motivation. This pessimistic prediction of the future context is not commensurate with Aviwe's worldview. She has the belief that rewards and happiness follow challenges.

**5.3.1.2 Aviwe's Relational Enablers of Resilience.** Aviwe's relational resilience enabling processes include recognising that others help her achieve her goals. In this regard, she aims to assist those in authority (e.g., teachers) as she believes this creates a reciprocal relationship that can help her achieve her goals. For example, Aviwe would assist her running coach in putting out cones before training, and her running coach will then offer additional advice and training tips beyond that which he gives to the group. Aviwe also identifies role models who achieve relationships to maintain strong connections. Her mother and uncle are both individuals that Aviwe recognises as people who have sacrificed in the present to achieve better outcomes. This delayed gratification ideology again fits with Aviwe's worldview that achievement is the product of "pushing through" difficulty while others give in. Aviwe believes that academic success, like her running, is a race where those who are prepared to sacrifice now reap the rewards later. Aviwe admires her mother's ability to self-

correct and find solutions to the financial challenges brought on the family when her father left. While the strategy was not immediate, Aviwe recognised that her mother's commitment to studying further to improve her chances of success reflects Aviwe's recognition that rewards are worthy of the time and effort to promote them. This recognition of the personal strengths of others extends to the relational dynamics of resilience-building.

Notably, Aviwe is deliberate in her relational strategies. She does not allocate considerable time and energy to relationships that are not beneficial to achieving her goals. Aviwe will spend more time with those individuals in her social environment who can support her development without draining her emotional resources. Her church social support also helps validate Aviwe and encourages her pro-social behaviour.

**5.3.1.3 Aviwe's Structural Enablers of Resilience.** Aviwe is aware of those structural supports that have assisted her in meeting the academic demands expected of her. Aviwe is a recipient of a SASSA foster care grant that helps her maternal grandmother (who fosters her) meet Aviwe's primary care needs. Aviwe's transport to school and nutritional needs may not have been met without assistive financial care as her grandmother and mother are both unemployed. Aviwe's school also recognised Aviwe's achievements and awarded her a bursary to alleviate the financial challenges of school fees. This external motivation of reward based on achievement promotes a positive transaction between Aviwe, her studies, and her school ecology.

Moreover, Aviwe's school provides the necessary resources (e.g., internet access, science labs, data projector and computers) to promote academic engagement – which Aviwe utilises. Aviwe's school provides various extra-curricular activities and

resources, including cross-country running. Aviwe can use running as a coping skill to contain and manage distress and as a vehicle for recognition within her educational environment. Therefore, Aviwe is rewarded for excelling in an activity that also serves her mental well-being.

**5.3.1.4 Aviwe's Spiritual/cultural Enablers of Resilience.** Aviwe recognises her religion and culture as protective mechanisms. She regularly attends church with her grandmother and her siblings and values her faith as something that "gives her hope". Aviwe recognises that the practice of prayer is a tool for hopefulness. She values her relationship with a higher power as though this power were overseeing her progress and "blessing" her with opportunities to succeed. She then behaves in a manner that fits with the expectations of her faith (e.g., avoiding substance use and having no sexual promiscuity). These practices align with helpful strategies for mitigating risks associated with substance dependence, teen pregnancy and other consequences of unhelpful behavioural strategies that run contrary to her Christian faith.

The cultural practice of "black tax" is also identified as a resource. Aviwe's uncle (the family patriarch) assumes the role of advice-giver and supports the family financially in his role. This practice is expected within Aviwe's culture. Aviwe recognises the value of social support through cultural practice and maintains respect for the patriarch of her family. Despite Aviwe's identification as a strong and capable female, she continues to recognise the potential support patriarchy can offer within the context of her family.

### **5.3.2 Bianca's Social-ecological Resilience-building Process**

**5.3.2.1 Bianca's Personal Enablers of Resilience.** Bianca is a creative problem-solver. While Bianca presents as a learner with a low self-concept and low

confidence in social interactions, she focuses only on those positive attributes that allow her to move toward her goals. Bianca is aware that she has low self-confidence. However, Bianca does not appear to be encumbered by mistakes and setbacks. This capacity to shrug off failure and move forward is a personal strength of Bianca's. She will quickly brush off negativity and try to figure out how to overcome challenges. Bianca's resourcefulness is also a personal strength.

Bianca has been identified as one who thinks outside the box to locate and secure resources that can benefit her development. She will actively collect left-over resources in her art class to take home so that she can work on her art after hours. Her salient strength resides in her creative expression and self-efficacy for animation. Bianca seems to have an unwavering hope that her future will be better than her past and present. She is motivated by the intrinsic rewards that this idealised future might hold to take her out of the current adversity she faces. Moreover, Bianca perceives her diagnosed ADHD learning barrier as an asset she values that supports hyperfocus on her art.

To a certain extent, Bianca also appreciates some form of extrinsic reward. While she does not perceive others as liking her as a person, she does perceive that others appreciate and recognise her skills as an artist. Bianca uses her creations to obtain validation with her online community.

**5.3.2.2 Bianca's Relational Enablers of Resilience.** Bianca is aware that she does not fit into the social norms of her peers' expectations. She has no friends and has a history of peer rejection and thus has become more specific in whom she chooses to include in her core. Bianca's boyfriend appears to be a significant relational enabler of resilience. She seems to have put her relational resilience-enabling stock in her intimate relationship. She describes her boyfriend as her "rock".

She further discusses how her boyfriend motivates her toward her goals. This suggests that Bianca has shared her goals and aspirations with her boyfriend and invites him to keep her accountable and encourage her progress toward said goals. In this way, Bianca has given her boyfriend a license to have a degree of responsibility for motivating her toward success. My impressions of Bianca are that she does not possess a healthy self-concept and tends to dismiss positive feedback, as these comments may not agree with her internalised self-perception image. Bianca appears to perceive that she is fortunate to have a person in her life who knows her and "gets her".

Another relational support is present within her area of creative competency. Bianca's art teacher appears to recognise Bianca's talent and appreciates her conscientiousness. This art teacher appears to be the only adult with whom Bianca confides about her challenges. Of interest is that Bianca seems to have identified and put her trust in one peer (boyfriend) and one adult (art teacher) relationship. She appears to recognise that she can rely on these two figures without having to expand her social circle.

Her online community of animators also supports Bianca. She participates in online groups on social media where she shares resources with others and receives creative support in return. The support of these online communities helps Bianca find others who share her passion for art and animation.

**5.2.2.3 Bianca's Structural Enablers of Resilience.** Bianca is a recipient of a full education scholarship from a school benefactor. The prize is reportedly awarded to children who show outstanding academic achievement despite challenges. Consequently, this prize is awarded for academic resilience. Bianca originally attended a special remedial school following her diagnosis of attention deficit

hyperactive disorder and subsequent concentration challenges that affected her learning at school. While she faced peer rejection and bullying, the school fostered an environment that appeared to help Bianca develop her skills such that by secondary schooling, she transferred to a mainstream environment that was able to offer her the resources and opportunities to succeed academically. Despite her learning barrier, she actively chose those subject areas that catered to her strengths (art and languages).

The school also offers an extra-curricular arts programme wherein Bianca could access teachings and specialised materials that could further develop her skills. She utilises her artistic talents to gain recognition and validation among teachers and pupils.

**5.3.2.4 Bianca's Spiritual/cultural Enablers of Resilience.** While Bianca does not describe herself as a spiritual person, she does acknowledge a culture of artistic types who appear to share common traits and interests. This way, Bianca integrated herself into a community of like-minded, artistic individuals who actively support one another through social media platforms. This capacity to access a collective wherein Bianca receives acceptance and support is essential as Bianca has a history of struggling to engage physically with those in her immediate environments. Her identification as part of a specific group of artists who practice stop-animation has helped Bianca perceive that she shares a culture with others like her.

### **5.3.3 Claire's Social-ecological Resilience-building Process**

**5.3.3.1 Claire's Personal Enablers of Resilience.** As recognition from her peers, Claire's leadership qualities have had her voted into the student representative council (SRC) of her school. Her drive to affect change at a structural level to support those marginalised learners is a motivator for Claire. She positions herself in public

view of her peers and teachers as one who is reliable in holding positions of influence. She is also a member of the Peer Promoter team tasked with looking out for fellow learners and identifying those in need. Her assertiveness is a salient strength when tasked with communicating the needs of her fellow peers to the school.

There has been a comparative development in Claire's self-efficacy and self-concept since her primary schooling. Claire reported having been rejected by peers initially and as one who struggled with sexual identity. She has since found personal strength in self-acceptance as a gay woman. Moreover, Claire's view of education is that it will assist her in reaching the occupational goals she has set to study law. Claire identified systemic issues and views herself as capable of making positive changes within such systems. This personal agency to affect change across social ecologies is a resilience enabler for Claire.

Claire's conscientiousness and diligence are other qualities identified by teachers. Claire tries to gain an advantage within her academic environment by requesting old exam papers (when others reportedly do not). She also has the insight to change behaviours that are not aligned with her goals. This behavioural change is seen in her change of study style.

**5.3.3.2 Claire's Relational Enablers of Resilience.** Claire identified her girlfriend and head of the peer promoter group as her salient relational supports. The encouragement toward seeking self-acceptance is attributed to her girlfriend. Much of Claire's identity shift appears to begin with her intimate relationship with her girlfriend. Claire views her girlfriend as one who helped Claire change her self-perception from negative "weirdo" to champion of change.

Claire values altruism. This belief that the needs of others – mainly those more vulnerable – is a protective factor for her. Claire finds meaning and purpose in helping others. Her identity as an agency of change is validated through supporting vulnerable others.

Her online LGBTQ+ community also supports her views. Claire describes having friends across the globe who share similar views encourages her to continue fighting for change. Claire also sees a psychologist for individual therapy.

Claire respects and values her Peer Promoter head as a role model. This teacher performs a significant role in encouraging and demonstrating trustworthiness in Claire's life. Her paternal grandparents encourage structure and routine in Claire's life (with which she previously had limited experience whilst living with her mother). This structure has helped to maintain a sense of discipline and engagement with academic material in the home environment.

**5.3.3.3 Claire's Structural Enablers of Resilience.** Claire receives a foster care grant to help her paternal grandparents financially. Following a diagnosis of depression in 2020, Claire was put on medication to help with her emotional well-being. This was made possible through the government hospital. The possibility of seeing a psychologist working for the state also allowed her to seek individual therapy.

Claire received a fee-waiver bursary from her local school. Thus, her grandparents do not need to pay school fees. This bursary was possible due to her status as a child in foster care, as advocated by the key social worker in her case. The social system played a significant role in helping remove Claire from her risk-laden environment and re-home her in a place of safety following the incidents surrounding her negative maternal home environment.

Claire's school is a well-resourced mainstream high school that offers contemporary educational support systems and technology to promote learning experiences for children. Moreover, the school recognises the value of social support and learner agency, allowing Claire to engage on the SRC and as a peer promoter. These structures allow Claire to engage more meaningfully in her educational environment and secure relationships with others.

**5.3.3.4 Claire's Spiritual/cultural Enablers of Resilience.** Claire attributes a significant part of her resilience to the LGBTQ+ community. She views this community as a group of marginalised and vulnerable people who seek support from one another and endeavour to change systems of oppression. This community informs Claire's sub-culture by sharing values, beliefs and goals. As a member of this community, she describes having a sense of pride rather than shame. This transition from shame to feeling pride is framed through the lens that she is part of a group of similarly oppressed people. Claire further includes her experience as a woman as part of a divergent cultural experience.

Claire's use of language and terminology and worldview are primarily based on her interaction with her LGBTQ+ community. Claire actively transacts with online communities and support groups. She identified a culture of non-judgment within her community which she perceives as a protective factor in helping her develop her identity and more freely engage within her social ecologies.

#### **5.3.4 Dinga's Social-ecological Resilience-building Process**

**5.3.4.1 Dinga's Personal Enablers of Resilience.** Dinga's personal resilience enablers include, among others, her dedication and commitment to mastering skills. Dinga's foster parents and music teacher reference Dinga's tireless work ethic as a key strength. Despite attaining a level 8 in piano, Dinga continues to practice as

though she has barely scratched the surface of what it is she can come to know about the instrument. Dinga sees "winning" and success as predicted by dedication and commitment to seeing things through rather than giving up. Dinga does not waste time criticising herself either; she picks herself up and carries on with it.

Dinga can also recognise those personal characteristics that can be turned into strengths rather than dwelling on aspects that she would likely not be able to master. Dinga turned to music instead of sport as it mitigated her physical disability. Dinga's musical talent has helped her gain recognition in her educational environment as an achiever. Dinga can transfer the skills she uses to practice her scales to practising subjects like mathematics and science. Furthermore, Dinga uses her music to cope with life challenges through musical expressiveness.

Dinga's sense of humour is another essential resilience enabler. She can put others at ease and develop relationships based on openness and authenticity. Dinga's ability to use her non-verbal expressiveness and welcoming smile invite others to interact with her.

Dinga has a positive belief that her music and academic achievement will open doors to future tertiary education and employment for her.

**5.3.4.2 Dinga's Relational Enablers of Resilience.** Dinga's mother was a support to her. Dinga valued her mother's sacrifices to ensure Dinga had more opportunities than she had. The Smith family were a salient relational resilience enabler. The children interacted with Dinga and helped her to build her English language skills. Mr Smith's influence created the opportunity for Dinga to attend the local primary school, which formed the foundation for Dinga's academic career. Mr Smith was also seen as a role model for learning which Dinga seeks to emulate. When Dinga's mother died, the Smith family took her in and welcomed her into their

family. They also converted the outside room into a music room for Dinga so that she could practice her music and, together with Dinga's mother, purchased her keyboard.

Dinga's paternal family is another support structure for her. Dinga visits her family in the rural areas and is included in the cultural practices of her isiXhosa clan. Dinga values the community care and support she receives. This interaction also helps Dinga keep her mother's heritage, which Dinga integrates with her Western views adopted from the Smith family and her school.

Dinga's music teacher also encourages Dinga to pursue her musical passions. She recognises Dinga's talents as being unique and communicates this to Dinga. Her church worship pastor has also played a vital role in developing the foundations of Dinga's musical abilities.

**5.3.4.3 Dinga's Structural Enablers of Resilience.** Dinga was moved from a low socio-economic area to a middle-class suburban area when she was young. She was able to attend the local, well-resourced primary school and attend additional classes to improve her abilities. This school had half the number of learners in one class compared to her original school. This structure allowed her more access to individual support from the teacher.

Dinga's church was also structural support, where she first identified music as a calling for her. It was through the church that Dinga learned to play the keyboard. Dinga continues to attend church, where she now actively participates on the music team. Being part of this team brings her joy, which at the same time contributes to her relational enablers.

Dinga's current school has a music programme where Dinga has excelled. She reached grade 8 level piano before most and earned her a colours award for music. She also attends eisteddfods, where she wins recognition for her skills, which in turn

re-translated to her school environment through awards; Dinga's musical and academic achievements earned her a fee-waiver bursary. Dinga's foster parents also receive a foster care grant which is saved for Dinga's tertiary education.

**5.3.4.4 Dinga's Spiritual/cultural Enablers of Resilience.** Dinga describes herself as an “Anglo-Xhosa Princess”. She identified the strengths in both cultures and assimilated these into her identity. Dinga genuinely sees herself as part of the Smith family and calls Mr Smith "dad". Additionally, Dinga values the traditional aspects of her isiXhosa heritage and the community support from her extended, rural family. She maintains that both her families communicate love and support. Dinga integrates the interdependence of her African heritage with the more Western ideals of independence from her foster family.

Dinga's Christian faith is essential for her resilience. She values her relationship with God and actively participates in the life of her church. Dinga also uses prayer to connect with God, which brings her a sense of peace.

#### **5.4 Cross-case Synthesis**

According to Yin (2018), cross-case synthesis is an analytic strategy that only applies to the analysis of multiple-case studies. Because each case follows the same procedure, a personalised and targeted cross-case synthesis can be used to examine the responses. However, this approach differs from other conventional research syntheses and meta-analyses. This is because a cross-case synthesis should be "case-based" rather than "variable-based" (Byrne & Ragin, 2009). As Yin (2018) states, the goal of cross-case synthesis is to preserve the integrity of the whole case before comparing or synthesising within-case patterns across the cases. This approach fits with the study's aims for analysing *how* each participant engaged in their chosen resilience-enabling strategies. The following within-case patterns

were associated with the social ecology of resilience theory framework for personal, relational, structural, and spiritual/cultural resilience-enabling processes.

#### **5.4.1 Personal Resilience-enabling Processes**

The personal resilience-enabling processes include those characteristics and traits of the individual that promote better outcomes in the face of adversity. There is a reciprocal transaction between these personal attributes and social ecologies. In this way, the person's characteristics align with the capacities of the social ecologies in contextually relevant ways. This dynamic distinguishes resilience as a personal responsibility, as personal resilience enablers remain contingent on social ecologies. The present study identified four salient resilience-building themes that emerged from triangulating the data of the four individual cases.

**5.4.1.1 The Role of Gender.** At the outset of the study, it was not a consideration that the participants would all be female. Prospective participants were selected by the researcher and supervisor based on the degree to which they met the inclusion criteria. It is noteworthy, however, that the case study candidates that most closely evinced academic resilience were female. Incidentally, females do appear to fare better in academic environments than males. According to a two-decade-long review (1995-2018) of matric results in South Africa, Spaul and Makaluza (2019) found that females are 20% more likely to finish secondary schooling than males are. Moreover, a 2020 gender fact sheet study by the Department of Higher Education and Training found that just under two-thirds of all university graduates were female. This statistic may be surprising given that females have been historically disadvantaged in South Africa and are widely acknowledged as a vulnerable group. According to Jefferis and Theron (2017), females are most at risk for gender-based violence, unsafe school environments, and intimate-partner violence and face a

higher risk for HIV infection. Moreover, the authors state that when gender is considered, culturally and contextually meaningful resilience-supporting facilitation becomes more complex. Louw and Louw (2022) discuss that gender schema develops in childhood and becomes a framework through which children perceive the world and become aware of and develop gender roles. These culturally prescribed gender roles can potentially increase vulnerability in women when traditional roles place females at risk (Jefferis & Theron, 2017).

However, there are also culturally and contextually influenced gender roles that empower women, as observed in Jordan's (2017, 2018) Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) of female resilience. According to Jordan, culturally-aligned positive connections to reciprocally supportive others are facilitated through functions like nurturing and caring. Jordan's studies found that female resilience is strengthened when their relational structures are strong. Furthermore, Phasha (2010) found that females tend to engage in other resilience-enabling processes, such as investing in education and hoping for a brighter future.

All four participants in the current study were identified as learners who invest in their educational outcomes despite adversity, affirming the findings of Phasha (2010). Moreover, all participants had future aspirations for tertiary education and occupational roles. One explanation for female academic achievement in the face of adversity is that despite the reported increased vulnerability faced by women and girls in South Africa, protective, resilience-enabling mechanisms are available to mitigate risks and foster resilience. An alternative explanation is that females may have a more robust capacity to identify and use resilience enablers than their male counterparts have. Masood and colleagues (2016) found that females were significantly more capable of dealing with distress from specific negative life events

than males. Moreover, Van der Graaf (2017) described that adolescent females show more pro-social behaviour compared to males and that this helps them at a relational level to secure support. Thus, it can be considered that females tend to navigate personal and relational resilience enablers more effectively than males do.

In this study, Claire expressly referred to the unique vulnerabilities and challenges females face in South Africa. At the same time, Aviwe acknowledged safety concerns for running in her neighbourhood as a female who might be targeted. Dinga positively described her cultural experiences of being female in that the women in her clan supported her and how specific gender roles and the female collective assisted her in being part of a community with purpose.

**5.4.1.2 Framing Adversity and Meaning-making.** Framing adversity and creating meaning from hardship is a well-established personal strategy for bouncing back. Haffejee and Theron (2017) state that when females in their study were able to make meaning from their experiences, they presented with less negative appraisals and adjusted more positively to adversity. Similarly, Theron and Theron (2014) found that the lived experiences of children in their social ecologies stimulated multifarious meaning-making. According to the authors, this was achieved by moderating positive re-appraisals, goal revision, purposeful direction, benefit finding, and reflective problem-solving. These characteristics were evident in the current study.

Aviwe framed her challenges as tests that produced physical and psychological fitness for overcoming future struggles. She did not avoid challenges but seemed to embrace them with the mindset that such challenges produced skills. She referred to running and how, while the temptation to stop when fatigued is ever-present, it is only through endurance that one progresses and develops skills. Aviwe also valued

her capacity to persevere despite the difficulty. She perceived herself as moving past setbacks efficiently. Her worldview seemed to reflect a "pushing through" attitude.

Dinga, like Aviwe, considered adversity as a trial. Dinga's framing of her experiences included that more opportunities for learning and growth are present when one continues to push the limits of one's capacities. Dinga embraced the analogy of her music and that once one is satisfied with where one is, one accepts the limits. Dinga maintained that she wished to see how far she could go. Therefore, her worldview also resembled an attitude to "never give up".

Bianca framed her challenges differently. It seemed that the more adversity Bianca experienced, the more motivated she became to escape them. On the other hand, Bianca also tried to reframe them. For example, she accepted her "bits and pieces", and persevered "to make things work". She embraced her artistic talent and academic success and perceived these as avenues to escape her present circumstances and make her own life. Moreover, Bianca had contingency plans if her initial planning did not materialise.

Claire framed her challenges as part of being a woman in a society that does not look after girls. Claire considered her adversity part of an unfair system that she aimed to address and a family pattern she wished to break. Claire also viewed her gayness as making her more vulnerable; therefore, additional effort is required to overcome challenges and succeed. Claire also framed her adversity as a motivator to help vulnerable others once she has completed her tertiary studies. She did not wish others to endure the challenges she had faced and sought to succeed in a way that might allow her to make a difference for others like her.

**5.4.1.3 Optimism and Hopefulness for the Future.** Phasha (2010) indicated that those individuals who try to find meaning in their adversity convey a sense of hope

and optimism. Thus, framing adversity further encourages more positive perceptions of the future.

According to Maldini (2014) future orientated beliefs regarding goals and aspirations are correlated with positive perceptions of the world and promote adaptation in the context of adversity. In this regard, findings from Jefferis and Theron's (2017) study on South African female resilience suggest that those participants with more positive perspectives of their futures associated education with this better future. A recent study by Maheshwari and Jutta (2020) found that participants who were able to increase their positive and optimistic thoughts during a specific negative life event evince solid and resilient outcomes. A study by Jacobs and Nadat (2021) also indicated that young, resilient South African females were able to repeatedly express specific goals and future aspirations for better lives.

All four participants in the present study evinced positive expectations for the future. Moreover, the learners perceived academic achievement as a pathway to a better future regardless of present challenges. Aviwe optimistically framed her mother's leaving as it was perceived that her mother's decision to study further would benefit the family. Furthermore, Aviwe described that her future would be positive if she continued her current strategy for academic achievement, which would culminate in her plans to study for a BSc. Aviwe also included her mother in her optimism for the future, stating that they will achieve their goals and help one another.

Bianca expressed a clear idea of her future aspiration of being an animator and how this future occupational interest motivated her to continue engaging in her academic work. She maintained that her motivation comes from knowing what she wants to do. Bianca also believed that her agency could change her trajectory to

produce a better future for herself and her loved ones. Bianca commented on her clay model, "I guess it's like we have this thing where it's our story, and we can make it."

Claire, like Bianca, found motivation and hope in academic achievement by opening financial doors. As with Bianca's goal to achieve and receive a scholarship to pay for her studies, Claire is motivated by the hope that her studies will also be financed if she too achieves academically. Moreover, Claire, like Bianca, focused on moving past negative experiences and setting her sights on what was to come. Claire commented on her drawing and wants to leave her "darker past behind and go into a bright and colourful future."

Dinga maintained a positive mindset for the future based on her uncompromised expectation that she would study music (her passion). Like the other participants, she focused on moving past unfavourable circumstances and confronted her situation with humour and re-direction.

Hopeful agency has been associated with escaping disadvantage or "getting out" (Redmond, 2009, p. 546). Thus, this motivation to access opportunities in the future and leave the current challenges is a personal resilience enabler that also overlaps with structural disadvantage. Additionally, according to Theron (2020), much of the hope related to resilience correlates with dreams of the future and a self that are not limited by systemic constraints.

**5.4.1.4 Creativity and Problem-solving.** According to a study by Casale (2011), individuals who can problem-solve have an increased capacity to reframe problems as challenges. These individuals analyse their circumstances carefully and develop context-specific constructive strategies to overcome adversity. This theme of creativity and problem-solving transacts with the capacity to reframe adversity.

However, the strategy also involves an active approach to locating internal and external supports. Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) work on the role of creativity described how individuals who experience distress use active, creative engagement (termed flow) to distance themselves from adversity. Moreover, he posited that creative people could better adapt to specific domains within their chosen fields – they may even change and existing domain or transform an existing domain into a new one through creative acts, ideas, or products. Similarly, Metzl and Malissa (2008) emphasise the importance of creativity in resilience processes and describe that creativity is associated with divergent thinking. The authors maintain that individuals empowered to utilise available resources creatively foster resilience.

Participants in this study have demonstrated creativity in problem-solving as a resilience-enabling process. Aviwe developed a creative solution to help her access online study material. When the COVID-19 lockdown occurred in 2020, Aviwe made arrangements to use her academic strengths to assist her neighbour's child in exchange for the use of their internet. Aviwe recognised that relying on her cellular data to maintain her study methods would be unsuitable and thus problem-solved to ensure that her academic achievement was not compromised.

Bianca demonstrated explicit creativity as a means to cope and build resilience. Bianca participated in extra-curricular art classes wherein she demonstrated creative problem-solving to ensure that she could continue to express herself creatively. She would request leftover materials and gather them to take home so she could continue working.

It was notable that Bianca went beyond the materials provided to ensure that her piece could stand during the clay modelling artefact activity. She used the wooden sticks from a scented container to create legs for her tripod camera when the clay

legs kept sagging. Bianca identified a creative occupational interest as an animator – a career strongly associated with creativity.

Like Bianca, Dinga also engaged in an extra-curricular creative programme. Dinga had embraced music as a means to achieve in a sphere that did not require athleticism whilst also helping her process challenges. Dinga excelled musically. This aptitude for music was also an additional support mechanism for her academic engagement, as she had selected music as an academic subject.

Claire's creativity appears most evident in her study techniques. Claire describes how she initially used to read over her work and that this sufficed up to Grade 9. After that, she found that she needed to create a new way of studying for herself to help her better understand concepts. This recognition that her earlier methods did not match her academic needs spurred Claire to create a person-specific strategy that suited her needs – one in which she could visually make sense of study material.

#### **5.4.2 Relational Resilience-enabling Processes**

Luthar (2006) maintains that relationships are central to resilience processes. Moreover, Casale (2010) found that women's and girls' resilience is co-facilitated by relational contexts that support them pragmatically and emotionally whilst supporting others. Studies show that females actively seek help from their social ecologies in times of contextual risk; Jefferis and Theron (2017) described that resilience is scaffolded across age and culture when resolute action in the context of supportive others is manifested.

The present study identified three salient resilience-building themes that emerged from triangulating the data of the four individual cases.

**5.4.2.1 Intimate-other.** According to Louw and Louw (2022), individuals who perceive themselves as being in committed and supportive intimate relationships show more decisive adjustment to distress. This theme was unexpected as my perception included that intimate relationships may be more of a risk to academic achievement than a protective process. Joly's (2017) study on youth at risk in South Africa found that intimate relationships could help or hinder resilience; romantic partners either promoted the youth's resilience by encouraging goals or undermined resilience by being distractions from goals. However, Joly's study found that intimate relationships were framed as positive resilience enablers for most participants.

In the current study, two participants identified themselves as being in secure and committed intimate relationships. Both participants described positive experiences of these relationships as benefiting self-worth and encouraging academic achievement.

Bianca indicated that her boyfriend is the most salient support in her life. Bianca was also aware of the difference in her emotional well-being before she met her boyfriend. She describes her boyfriend as one she draws strength from and one who reminds her of her assets. Much of Bianca's relational resilience involves her boyfriend, whom she describes as the one person who understands her. He is also the person who helps her to engage academically and to achieve her aims.

According to Louw and Louw (2022), some adolescents show reticence in joining a peer group. These adolescents' interests may be divergent from those of the peer group. Moreover, they are often sure of their identities and goals to the extent that they do not need group support and interaction. They frequently only have one close friend who provides the necessary support and companionship. However, personality characteristics such as introversion, shyness, and feelings of inferiority

can also play a role. This may explain why Bianca puts the relational resilience-enabling stock in her boyfriend.

Claire describes her girlfriend as loyal and as a significant support in helping her come to terms with her identity as a gay woman. The acceptance experienced by Claire from her girlfriend appeared to help Claire accept herself, which supported her self-concept. This, in turn, appears to have motivated Claire to engage within the schooling environment as someone living an "authentic life". Studies have shown that LGBTQ youths show less psychological distress and are buffered against the harmful effects of bullying and victimisation when they are in a relationship than when they are not (see Louw & Louw, 2022; Northwestern University, 2018).

**5.4.2.2 Relational Role Models of Achievement.** According to Williams and colleagues (2017), resilience role models are those individuals who encourage others by modelling resilience-building behaviours that empower others. These interactions between a person and their resilient role model promote positive coping with adversity. A seminal study by Werner and Smith (1992) found that children only required the support of one adult figure they perceived as a role model. Role models of resilience act as personable maps to navigate challenges that resonate with children experiencing adversity.

Aviwe identified her uncle as a role model of achievement and success. Her uncle had also grown up under similar conditions, and financial constraints yet had overcome challenges to be the patriarch and support for the entire family. Moreover, she recognised similar qualities in her mother, whom she perceived as having made sacrifices to continue her education.

Dinga identified her foster father, Mr Smith, as a role model for achievement and education. Though Mr Smith did not come from similar circumstances to Dinga, she

can still recognise and appreciate the efforts Mr Smith undertakes to continue lifelong learning. Mr Smith embodies a goal that Dinga wishes to emulate, wherein she continues to develop. This is demonstrated in how she views progress in musical competency. Dinga has an appreciation for behaviours that promote continued learning and development. Mr Smith is one figure to whom she attributes these characteristics.

Claire identified her peer promoter head as an adult with whom she could meaningfully engage as one who shared similar beliefs and perspectives. Her teacher, also a gay woman, supported Claire in the educational environment and gave her the responsibility to lead the peer promoter group to assist other learners in need. Her teacher was a role model of what a gay woman mindful of social justice embodies – something Claire wished to emulate in her future aspirations.

**5.4.2.3 Auxiliary Staff Support.** Jefferis and Theron (2017) described academic teachers as essential players in children's social ecologies. Multiple studies in South Africa have reinforced the role of teachers in children's social ecologies (see Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012; Theron et al., 2022; Wabule, 2020). Of interest is that the participants in the present study identified auxiliary academic subject teachers as salient supports rather than those teachers associated with typical academic subject matters.

Aviwe's running coach recognises leadership qualities in her. Aviwe was offered a leadership role in her running team and is given additional training tips after the regular training sessions.

Bianca identified her art teacher as a supportive figure in her life, one who shows interest in her and actively seeks to engage with her. It seems that Bianca trusts this teacher enough to share her life matters and the challenges she experiences at

home. Thus, the teacher recognises that Bianca uses her art to cope with challenges.

Dinga also identified a creative/performing arts teacher (music teacher) as someone with whom she confides and connects at an interpersonal level. Dinga indicated that the teacher recognises her talent and that she seeks out this person when she experiences a "tough day at school".

Claire's peer promoter head supported her in creating a space for Claire to develop her gender and sexual identity through an environment of non-judgment and tolerance for divergent beliefs and ways of being.

The auxiliary teachers identified by the three participants are persons who offered encouragement and directed the participants toward additional resources. These teachers also seemed to be caring, show personal interest in them and provided positive feedback. These are the qualities that Jefferies and Theron (2017) identified as resilience enablers in teachers in their study.

#### **5.4.3 Structural Resilience-enabling Processes**

According to Boyden and Cooper (2009), structural disadvantages are typified by chronic inequitable opportunities ingrained in people's social, economic, and political marginalisation. These structural disadvantages increase adverse developmental outcomes which individuals have limited capacity to avoid (Young, 2015). However, as researchers advocate (see Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2015), individuals can co-facilitate resilience within these social systems. Theron (2020) describes that children at risk do so by collaboratively negotiating for, and engaging with, contextually relevant systemic resources. These resources heighten the chances of positive developmental outcomes.

Moreover, studies in the South African context have shown how investing in education is valued as a vehicle for overcoming structural disadvantages (see Lethale & Pillay, 2013; Mhlongo & O'Neill, 2013). The present study identified three salient resilience-building themes that emerged from triangulating the data of the four individual cases.

**5.4.3.1 Structural Financial Support.** According to Van Der Berg et al. (2022), while South Africa is identified as a middle-income country, its extensive social security system has the hallmarks of a modern welfare state. Foster care grants aim to reimburse foster parent(s) for the cost of caring for children who are not their own. This support aims to reduce structural inequalities that might prevent children from pursuing positive outcomes. According to Wallander and Koot (2016), investing in children for the long-term results in economic and social benefits for society.

Three of the four participants are recipients of SASSA foster care grants. Most of the participants recommended for the current study by the school-based support teams were children whose foster parents had applied for reductions in school fees with the support of critical social workers. Aviwe's father had reportedly abandoned the family, leaving her unemployed mother (who had also been ill) with the financial responsibility of supporting her children. When the opportunity for Aviwe's mother presented, Aviwe and her sisters were put in the care of their grandmother (a pensioner) while Aviwe's mother relocated to a different province. Aviwe's grandmother received foster care grants for the siblings, which assisted in financing living costs and school-related expenses.

Moreover, since Aviwe is a child in foster care, her school significantly reduced her school fees. This financial assistance created the opportunity for Aviwe to attend a well-resourced school. Additionally, when Aviwe evinced her academic aptitude at

school, she was awarded a full tuition bursary that included stationery and books. Her educational environment was able to reward Aviwe and relieve the financial burden of education.

Like Aviwe, Claire is also in foster care. When Claire's mother could no longer support her and was deemed at risk by social services, she was placed in the care of her paternal grandparents. This decision by social services presented a more structured and secure home environment for Claire. Her grandparents could also take on the additional costs with the additional finances. Claire can also attend a well-resourced school where her school fees have been reduced based on her status as a child in foster care.

Dinga receives a foster care grant following her mother's death and subsequent integration into the Smith family. However, the Smith family have chosen to put the money from the foster care grant into a savings plan for Dinga's tertiary education.

Bianca is the only participant not receiving a government support grant. However, she was selected by a governing body committee to be awarded a full tuition scholarship for the entirety of her academic secondary education. This scholarship was awarded based on her academic performance despite adversity.

**5.4.3.2 Extra-curricular Programmes.** All four participants attended well-resourced schools that were able to offer modern educational resources to promote learning opportunities. Archer's (2005) study established a link between involvement in recreational and educational activities and belongingness, increased confidence, and bolstered self-esteem. The availability of divergent extra-curricular school activities presents additional opportunities for children to engage with social ecologies and identify personal strengths and resources to support their needs.

Aviwe's passion for sport and exercise helped her succeed in the sporting sphere. This sporting competency assisted Aviwe in establishing an all-rounded identity as an academic and sporting achiever. The cross-country and athletics programmes offered at Aviwe's school allowed her to take part in running. She could not safely undertake this activity in her home neighbourhood due to high crime rates, so she frequently participated in running activities promoted by the school. Aviwe also used running as a coping mechanism to support her mental well-being. Thus, her social ecology was able to offer activities that promoted resilience building.

Bianca participates in extra-curricular art in addition to taking art as a school subject. Bianca can express herself creatively through art at her school, where materials and resources are available, and she has access to specialised teaching. Bianca uses her creativity as a coping skill and considers her creativity as a tool to help her progress positively in life. The arts programme at her school helped her to identify her artistic talent, such that Bianca has plans to attend the Vega School to study animation. Furthermore, her teacher allows her to take home leftover materials so Bianca can continue creating and experimenting at home.

Dinga, like Bianca, also uses creative expression to regulate her emotional well-being and establish her identity as an achiever. However, while Bianca involves her talents in art, Dinga has pursued musical competency since she was in primary school. Dinga's musical aptitude has also attracted praise from her music teacher and awards from eisteddfods. Given Dinga's physical disability, the accessibility to creative activities that do not rely on physical strength is essential.

Claire takes part in two extra-curricular societies at school. Whilst Aviwe, Bianca and Claire all participate in programmes that relate to their specific skills in sport, art and music, Claire's skills lie in her social advocacy. Claire is an active member of the

SRC (student representative council) and the Peer Promoter team. Claire values social justice and supporting the needs of the vulnerable. Her participation in the SRC allows Claire to share her voice and make decisions that affect school policy in positive ways. She can also personally support fellow students through the Peer Promoter programme. Through these societies, Claire can meaningfully engage in her school life. Moreover, these societies serve as a platform for her future aspirations in law.

**5.4.3.3 Education as a Road to Success.** Education itself is a structural resilience enabler. The quality of schools, teachers, facilities, and resources offered by schools serve as social ecology enablers of resilience. According to Theron (2020), resilient children are more likely to envision education as the route to a better future. This view of education as the key to positive outcomes aligns with Ungar's (2015) social-ecological claim that the formal systemic support of schools is more critical for resilience than personal strengths or relational support. Additionally, as discussed, mentors in such systemic environments have the potential to facilitate personal resilience-enabling processes such as hopeful agency (Wesely et al., 2017).

All the participants value education as a means to better their future outcomes. Aviwe intends to study a BSc at the tertiary level, which necessitates a healthy admission point score at the secondary school level. Aviwe recognises her mother's sacrifice to secure education as an effort that will produce positive outcomes. Moreover, Aviwe recognises education as the path to a better future and occupational opportunities.

Bianca is also motivated to achieve so she can continue to secure financial assistance. She recognises that academic achievement is rewarded at a structural,

systemic level and opens opportunities for her to access educational environments that she might not be able to access were it not for her commitment to education.

Claire's aspirations to study law at the tertiary level are motivated by her desire to help those who have experienced similar adversity to her. She identified education as the key to navigating the challenges in life and accessing opportunities. Moreover, she knows she could be the first woman in her family to attend university. She recognises that this opportunity sets her apart and helps her avoid the fate of other women in her family who did not use education as a vehicle for a better life. She, therefore, wants to be the first woman in her family to go to university.

Claire also describes how she recognised that she needed to change her approach to learning to improve her results and adapt to the increasing difficulty in secondary schooling.

Dinga also values education as a means to promote successful outcomes. She recognised that her foster family values education and used it to succeed similarly to their father, whom she describes as her role model because he is a "lifelong learner". Dinga aspires to attend university and study Music.

#### **5.4.4 *Spiritual/cultural Resilience-enabling Processes***

Studies have demonstrated the importance of religion and culture as an enabler of resilience due to integrating internal assets with positive external sources (Bardi & Guerra, 2011; Fischer, 2010). Locally, South African research findings demonstrate that religion is essential in fostering resilience (see Ebersöhn & Bouwer, 2013; Mohangi et al., 2011; Van Breda, 2017; 2019). The social ecology resilience process involves co-facilitating personal assets (prayer, religious text reading) with positive external supports (socialising with others who share beliefs), which create protective mechanisms against adversity. In addition, cultural resilience was confirmed in

several South African studies (see, e.g., Liebenberg & Theron, 2016). Generally, cultural traditions and support services embedded in culture may provide various protective factors.

**5.4.4.1 Religious/spiritual Connection.** A local study by Pasha (2010) described how adversities are overcome by trust in spiritual beings. Pasha maintains that this trust in a higher power translates to positive experiences of happiness, gratitude, patience, love, and hope, which enable resilience processes. Clark (2009) and Archer (2005) advocate that individuals can reframe their adversity as part of a greater purpose that can facilitate meaning-making. Moreover, these authors describe how individuals believe this higher power could turn negative experiences into something positive or beautiful.

Aviwe describes strong roots in her Christian faith. Her maternal grandmother plays a vital role in integrating Aviwe and her siblings into the life of the local church where she lives. Aviwe describes that belief in God and church attendance are essential for her and that her grandmother's active role in the local church helped to facilitate Aviwe's integration into the life of the church

Aviwe associates religion with having a purpose. The belief that one's life has purpose and meaning is a salient motivator for resilience (Van Breda, 2019). Moreover, Aviwe's active role in the church is also associated with positive behaviours, such as pro-social behaviours that are more likely to endear herself to others in authority. Aviwe is shown to be helpful to others in her community and her teachers. Serving others is part of her Christian faith. The values associated with her faith also helps Aviwe to mitigate unhelpful risk-taking behaviours (e.g., substance abuse, sexual promiscuity/ teen pregnancy), which contradict her Christian beliefs.

Like Aviwe, Dinga has grown up within a religious culture and community. Her extended paternal family are active in their local church, and from an early age, Dinga experienced positive perceptions of religion and church attendance. She describes that she loves the church and her relationship with God. Dinga first experienced music at church, which became her most salient coping skill. Dinga also practices personal processes of religious connection. She identifies prayer as the key to connecting with a higher power.

**5.4.4.2 Identification with a Community Culture.** According to a local study by Dlamini et al. (2018), community and ecological resilience are synonymous. The concept of 'community resilience' is almost invariably viewed as positive, promoting access to resources and relational support. The authors maintain that a social-ecological perspective of resilience includes the contexts of schools concerning the community, households, and individuals. Members who identify as being part of a community culture with shared beliefs, interests, and values, share resources with others within the group that promote positive outcomes. This sharing process is reciprocal as members seek relational support. Another South African study by Ahmed and colleagues (2004) showed how identification and participation in the community afford opportunities for access to knowledge, social support networks, and hopefulness. While community resilience is still a relatively new domain of resilience, community involvement need not be geographically limited as many contemporary communities exist online through social media and are shown to contribute to resilience-building processes (see Beatson, 2017; Xie, 2022).

While Bianca and Claire do not recognise religion or faith as resilience enablers, both participants describe strong connections with community cultures with which they share common attributes, beliefs, and values.

Bianca identifies with the creative animation community. She belongs to various Facebook groups and other social media creators who share ideas on stop-motion animation. Bianca is not simply a passive recipient of ideas and support but also actively engages in sharing her content with the online communities to whom she reflects and provides encouragement. Bianca's experiences of being part of the animation community have also spurred her to pursue a future occupation as an animator.

Claire attributes her LGBTQ+ member status as key to her identity development and well-being. Claire describes being initially reticent to identify as a community member as she had previously experienced peer rejection. However, she describes how vital the LGBTQ+ community is to her and how it has changed her for the better since she knows she is not alone. She has become more confident, self-accepting, and authentic. Claire also describes how she has gained courage and found the motivation to pursue a career that someday fights for the rights of others.

While Dinga identifies her religious faith as a Christian as a salient enabler of resilience, she also recognises the strengths of the cultures in which she was raised, local, isiXhosa and Western. Dinga relays that while the two worlds are very different, they are also similar in the ways that matter: they both communicate love and support.

Dinga describes herself as an "Anglo-Xhosa Princess", a term she uses to embody how she sees her own cultural identity as being part Western and part isiXhosa. Dinga maintains that the women in her village teach her about her heritage, community, and *Ubuntu*.

Table 5.2 depicts the cross-case themes from the data generated through interviews, observations, collateral information, and artefacts.

Table 5.2

## Cross-case Themes

Resilience-enablers	Aviwe	Bianca	Claire	Dinga
<b>Personal Enablers</b>				
<b>Hopefulness and optimism</b>	Believes she would be successful.	Believes her art would take her to a better future.	She perceives herself as having the power to help others.	Sees music as a tool for meaning and purpose.
<b>Future aspirations guided by worldviews</b>	Future aspiration to study BSc.	Her future as an animator is depicted in her artefact.	Future aspiration is to be an attorney.	Future aspiration is to play and teach music.
<b>Creativity and resourcefulness</b>	Uses creative problem-solving to study during COVID-19. Traded tutoring for data.	Uses art animation as a means to succeed and cope. Collects left-over art materials.	Expresses creativity in her physical appearance.	Uses music to achieve success and to cope.
<b>Acceptance and reframing of setbacks</b>	Views setbacks as evidence to work harder.	Highlights that she does not give up when she makes mistakes.	Values coming out of a "dark" place into a "colourful" future	Does not give up and shows dedication to persevere.
<b>Physical activity</b>	Uses running and sport as means to achieve and cope.			
<b>Helpfulness to teachers/ authority</b>	Makes efforts to help teachers.	Helps art teacher tidy art room.	Assists her peer promoter head.	
<b>Sense of humour</b>				Uses humour to increase positive social interactions.
<b>Leadership</b>	Serves as a leader in her sports team and as a prefect elect.		Serves on the SRC and Peer promoter groups.	
<b>Social skills</b>	She gets on with peers and adults, who see her as		Makes an effort to interact with others and offers support.	Well-liked and uses skills to secure and maintain relationships.

<b>Low self-criticism</b>	disciplined and reliable.  Communicates confidence to herself.	Does not focus subjectively on her mistakes.	Does not internalise setbacks.	Does not criticise herself.
<b>Relational Enablers</b>				
<b>Foster family support</b>	Fostered by her grandmother.		Fostered by her paternal grandparents.	Fostered by the Smith family (mother's employers).
<b>Intimate relationship support</b>	Views having an intimate relationship with God.	Boyfriend is highlighted as primary support.	Girlfriend is salient support.	Views having an intimate relationship with God.
<b>Auxiliary staff support and role modelling</b>	Running coach communicates belief in her abilities. Her uncle and mother were role models of achievement.	The art teacher communicates her belief in Bianca's artistic talents.	The peer promoter head guides her and gives her leadership roles.	Music teacher and worship pastor encourage her passion for music. Foster parent is a role model of "life-long learning".
<b>Structural Enablers</b>				
<b>Foster-care grants SASSA</b>	Recipient of foster care grant.	Foster care grant saved by foster parents for her future studies.	Recipient of foster care grant.	Recipient of foster care grant.
<b>Well-resourced school and fee waivers</b>	Receives waiver/reduced fee for school fees. School internet, sports programmes, proficient teachers.	The school offers a diversity of additional learning and skill programmes with proficient staff.	Receives waiver/reduced fee for school fees. Access to extra learning and social programmes.	Receives waiver bursary for school fees. She values the increased structure of the new school. Music subject and specialised teaching at school.
<b>Change in the living area to a higher SES neighbourhood</b>		Bianca moved from a low-resource special needs school to a higher SES school.		Dinga moved from a township to a suburban area with better schooling. Access to music room.
<b>Church/ religious institution</b>	Receives relational and physical support from the church.			Receives relational and physical support from the church.
<b>State-sponsored care</b>		Gets state-sponsored	Consults state-employed	

<b>Education as key to success</b>	Values education provided, and the prospect of studying towards a BSc degree, and the opportunity to create better outcomes.	medication for inattention disorder.  Values education provided, and the prospect of studying animation after school, and the opportunity to create better outcomes.	psychologist and medication support for depression.  Values education provided and the prospect of studying towards a law degree and the opportunity to create better outcomes.	Values education provided, the prospect of studying towards a music degree, and the opportunity to create better outcomes.
<b>Spiritual/ cultural enablers</b>				
<b>Perceived acceptance and inclusion in community of shared culture</b>	Aviwe sees herself as accepted and valued within her church community and sports teams.	Bianca views the online animation art community as validating her passion and supporting her interests.	Claire actively participates in the online and physical LGBTQ+ community.	Dinga values her identification as a religious, church-involved youth.
<b>Religious/ spiritual connection</b>	She regards her relationship with God as essential and connects through prayer.			She regards her relationship with God as essential and connects through prayer.
<b>Integration of culture</b>	Values both independence and interdependence.		Values the culture of non-judgement and acceptance of her community.	Values the benefit of cultural integration; an "Anglo-Xhosa princess".

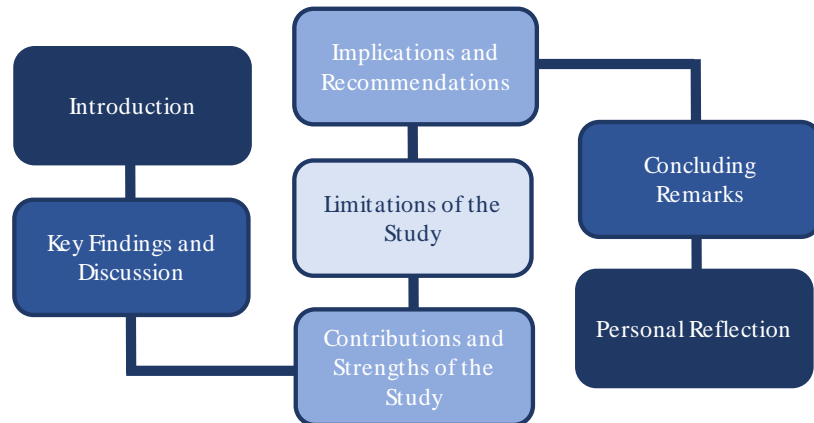
## 5.5 Summary

This chapter finalises the second phase of the data analysis section introduced in Chapter 4. This phase identified plausible rival explanations that might consider alternative hypotheses for the data and found these to be incompatible. After that, the explanation-building analytic strategy was introduced. I developed an integrated conceptual model based on extant research for the social ecology of resilience framework that describes how children co-facilitate resilience-enabling processes within their contexts of adversity. The resilience-building process for each case was

espoused using this model. Finally, the cross-case synthesis was added together with the contextually relevant themes unpacked based on the four categories of resilience enablers.

## CHAPTER 6

### KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION



#### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the key findings of the study. The contributions to the body of contemporary resilience research in South Africa are proposed, while the strengths and limitations of the study are also indicated. Recommendations for the way forward are suggested.

#### 6.2 Key Findings and Discussion

The key aim of the study was to investigate how at-risk adolescent learners from various backgrounds navigate their various ecologies to achieve better-than-expected academic outcomes, negotiate for resources in their ecologies to assist them in their scholastic careers, and transact with their various ecologies to develop academic resilience.

This study used a multiple-case study design to answer the research questions. Constructive realism was used as the philosophical lens through which the data could be made meaningful. This lens drew on both the positivistic appreciation of resilience as a measurable construct within psychological research and the in-depth descriptive and explanatory nature of meaning-making within the resilience-laden

narratives of the participants. This dimensional approach to conceptualising the data aided in answering how children engage within their social ecologies to overcome adversity and succeed academically.

As indicated in Chapter 5, I proposed a conceptual model (see Figure 5.1) based on extant literature (e.g., Ungar, 2011; Van Breda & Theron, 2018; Van Rensburg et al., 2015) for understanding the complex dynamics that embody the resilience-building processes of children who achieve academically against the odds. The research questions in the current study were investigated using this model (based on the SERT) as a conceptual guide to describe and explain resilience-building in the context of adversity. The model demonstrates how individuals co-facilitate the resilience-building processes with their social ecologies and resources, be they personal, relational, structural, spiritual, or a combination of these, in the context of adversity (biological vulnerabilities, specific life events, challenging social and physical environments, compound socio-demographic risks) to evince successful academic outcomes.

The research participants were identified by their respective teachers according to specific inclusion criteria. Four adolescent female participants who demonstrated resilience despite their various adversities were purposefully selected. Data was gathered through three interviews with each participant, interviews with their primary caregivers and significant teacher(s), documents and records, and visual artefacts to investigate the research questions. The data gave me insight into the participants' adversities, their resilience enablers, and how they navigated, negotiated for resources, and engaged with their social ecologies to foster resilience.

Since lived adversities are essential ingredients in the resilience process, the specific adversities of the research participants, as well as their resilience enablers

and interactive processes, were narrated by the four participants during the interview processes. Because much of the descriptions in case studies are retrospective and based on perceptions, the information was corroborated by the mentioned collateral data. The key findings are presented next.

### 6.2.1 Adversities Experienced by the Research Participants

The adversities experienced by the four female adolescent participants are depicted in Table 6.1.

**Table 6.1**

*Adversities Experienced by the Research Participants*

Adversities experienced			
Biological vulnerabilities	Specific life events	Challenging social and physical environments	Compound socio-demographic risks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Neurodevelopmental disorder(s) (e.g., ADHD).</li> <li>- Prenatal smoking and alcohol use/abuse.</li> <li>- Product of teenage pregnancy.</li> <li>- Genetic predisposition to depression and anxiety.</li> <li>- Depression.</li> <li>- Possible genetic correlation with sexual orientation.</li> <li>- Physical handicap.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Abrupt changes in living environments (relocation).</li> <li>- Bullying by peers.</li> <li>- Parental divorce.</li> <li>- Paternal and maternal abandonment.</li> <li>- Abuse (physical punishment, exhibitionism, exposure to pornography).</li> <li>- Life-threatening events.</li> <li>- Death of a parent.</li> <li>- Antagonistic relationship with a caregiver.</li> <li>- Separation from sibling(s).</li> <li>- Global pandemic and school/learning restrictions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Integration challenges in new schooling environments.</li> <li>- Unsafe/crime-ridden neighbourhoods.</li> <li>- Low-resourced township living.</li> <li>- Over-populated early schooling contexts.</li> <li>- Gangsterism.</li> <li>- Unreliable public transport.</li> <li>- Divergent values of community peers (few friends).</li> <li>- Low-resourced primary schooling.</li> <li>- Language of learning is dissimilar to the home language.</li> <li>- Perceived low support of parental figure.</li> <li>- Identification as gay.</li> <li>- Environments that do not cater to a physical handicap.</li> <li>- Poorly maintained infrastructure.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Financial constraints.</li> <li>- Absence from school due to transport issues.</li> <li>- Parental alcohol abuse.</li> <li>- Father absence.</li> <li>- Unemployed caregiver.</li> <li>- Domestic abuse.</li> <li>- Low socio-economic status.</li> <li>- Uneducated/low-educated parent(s).</li> </ul>

A perusal of the adversities experienced by the participants showed that risks and vulnerabilities emerged before they were born. Parents presenting with substance use problems, low education, financial challenges, and unhealthy behaviours (e.g., smoking, alcohol consumption, unprotected sex, teenage pregnancy, unhealthy nutrient intake, and partner discord) presented the context into which these children began life. Genetic predisposition may have played a significant role in vulnerability to learning disabilities, mood disorders and physical and genetic issues. None of the participants lived with both parents, and only one female lived with her biological mother – albeit in a negative relationship. Beyond the immediate parent-figure and family challenges lay the community and neighbourhoods in which these families lived. Crime, gangsterism, and unsafe and poorly maintained infrastructure (e.g., open electricity boxes and wiring, unhealthy ablution facilities) created an additional vulnerability to negotiating for support. Under-resourced and overpopulated schools limited educational development, while safety and financial constraints restricted access to community social activities. Parental divorce and parental abandonment contributed to relational challenges in the home, whilst residing in lower socio-economic areas and townships in which children do not perceive their values as aligning with the values of peers further limited relational support beyond the family (e.g., peers who engage in sexual promiscuity, substance abuse and crime). Peer rejection and bullying appeared prevalent for these children – particularly those with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, and sexual orientation differences from the peer norm group.

Abuse appeared commonplace for these children. They witnessed parental fighting and appeared to be prone to various forms of abuse and neglect. For some, support from parents was poor, and children were relocated to live with grandparents

who must assume the parental role of looking after the children. These children had to rely on government support through SASSA grants to afford basic needs and education. An additional challenge presented in the transition from one culture to another. For some, there was a stark change from an African context to more Western ways of being. This change included language differences which can affect learning and social relationship cultivation. At times this change from one cultural context to another was forced by financial constraints, parental abandonment and the caregiver seeking better opportunities to support the family; in other instances, it followed the death of a caregiver.

Finally, unforeseen challenges of a global pandemic and how its effects increased risk whilst affecting a child's access to their typical patterns of navigating toward resilience enablers were discussed. For the four participants in this study, resilience-enabling adaptation was required to navigate the changes that accompanied the lockdown. For one participant, her capacity to run was limited by her high-risk neighbourhood, whilst internet access was affected by financial constraints. The adult role models in the extra-curricular domains were also no longer physically accessible.

### **6.2.2 Resilience Enablers Experienced by the Research Participants**

The resilience enablers experienced by the four female adolescent participants are depicted in Table 6.2.

**Table 6.2**  
*Resilience Enablers Experienced by the Research Participants*

Resilience enablers experienced			
Personal	Relational	Structural	Spiritual/ Cultural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Self-confidence to 'push through'.</li> <li>- Sporting ability.</li> <li>- Creative talent.</li> <li>- Creative problem-solving and resourcefulness.</li> <li>- Helpful to teachers/adults in authority.</li> <li>- Use achievement in non-academic domains for recognition in educational environment.</li> <li>- Value personal drive to not give up.</li> <li>- Hope for the future.</li> <li>- Identification of ambition toward future profession.</li> <li>- Leadership skills.</li> <li>- Conscientiousness.</li> <li>- Academic commitment.</li> <li>- Sense of humour.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parent/guardian as a model of resilience.</li> <li>- Role model of academic achievement.</li> <li>- Popularity amongst peers.</li> <li>- Romantic, supportive relationship.</li> <li>- Supportive extra-curricular adult.</li> <li>- Online (internet-based) community of support.</li> <li>- Caregiver consistency with routine aiding studies.</li> <li>- Supportive grandparents taking parental roles.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SASSA foster grant support.</li> <li>- Education is embraced as a vehicle for better outcomes.</li> <li>- School tuition bursary/ reduced school fees.</li> <li>- Well-resourced schools.</li> <li>- State-sponsored medication.</li> <li>- Therapeutic consultations with state mental health professional.</li> <li>- Access to a social worker for foster care placement and aid.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Family involvement in a religious community.</li> <li>- Personal integration into spiritual/religious institutions.</li> <li>- Relationship with a higher spiritual being.</li> <li>- Prayer.</li> <li>- Support of family patriarch ('black tax').</li> <li>- Perceived acceptance/ tolerance from community culture (shared values and beliefs).</li> <li>- Integration of divergent cultures into self-concept.</li> </ul>

The four female participants had an array of resilience enablers at their disposal. Some strategies were fostered internally by the individual, such as their dispositional qualities, whereas others were provided by their environments. A child's agency to develop skills to meet the demands of their environments is key to promoting resilience. These children identified such personal assets as a sense of humour, helpfulness to adults, leadership, conscientiousness, and creative problem-solving, amongst others, to boost their capacity to mitigate threats. Moreover, they adopted mindsets to frame their experiences of adversity in helpful ways meaningfully. An example of such framing can be seen in how they responded to setbacks, accepting

setbacks as part of the experience, and focusing on other engagements to push through. This appears contrasted to other adolescents who adopt a victim mentality or self-deprecating perception, framing setbacks as excuses to give up. The four female participants used failure as a learning experience and persevered.

Maintaining hope for the future and focusing on future aspirations and career opportunities were prevalent. All the learners believed that education was a salient vehicle for future success. Some had role models who taught them the value of education. While tests and exams may not have consistently been positive, they did not frame education as a threat to success but as a road to achievement and positive outcomes in the future.

Achievement was not limited to the educational domain either. The participants appeared to transfer their strategies beyond the academic context to other competence areas. Music, sport, art and service were crucial domains of validation and achievement for these learners. Furthermore, their success in these extra-curricular areas received acknowledgement within the educational environment. Further still, these additional domains of competence were used to cope with psychological well-being. Thus, talents that create an opportunity for validation and reward also presented as means for self-care.

When the children faced new challenges in the form of the pandemic lockdown, their access to their usual resilience-enabling processes was negatively affected or restricted. The participants showed resourcefulness to ensure that they could either adapt to maintain access to resources (as demonstrated in one participant bartering data for internet access in exchange for tutoring a neighbour's child) or focusing on relational enablers such as online community support when physical access to persons of support was limited. They thus showed creative problem-solving to

ensure that they maintained support access in the face of adversity. These efforts indicate adaptability to change engagement in resilience enablers to fit the adversity context.

Structural supports included SASSA foster grants, state psychologists, and medication outside the educational environment. The financial assistance that created the opportunities for the participants to be educated at well-resourced schools included tuition bursaries, fee waivers and scholarships. Church played a significant role as the spiritual enabler of resilience and relational support for two participants. For the other two participants, online communities that shared interests and values motivated their ideals of achievement.

### **6.2.3 Research Participants' Navigation, Negotiation and Engagement with their Social Ecologies**

How the four female adolescent participants navigated, negotiated, and engaged with enablers of resilience within their social ecologies is depicted in Table 6.3.

**Table 6.3**

*How Children Transact Resilience Enabling through Social Ecologies*

Resilience enabling (SERT)		
Navigation	Negotiation	Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identification of contextually relevant resources.</li> <li>- Distinguishing between those resources that are likely to be of value and those that are not.</li> <li>- Observation of role model strategies.</li> <li>- Importance of achievement across ecologies.</li> <li>- Coping skills relevant across ecologies.</li> <li>- Securing the support of the spiritual/cultural community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Helpfulness to those who can offer resources in return.</li> <li>- Bartering.</li> <li>- Reciprocation in supportive relationships.</li> <li>- Reciprocation in supportive communities of shared culture.</li> <li>- Framing and meaning-making of setbacks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Agency: personal characteristics of conscientiousness, perseverance, and dedication.</li> <li>- A refusal to give up or avoid difficulty.</li> <li>- Active (rather than passive) engagement with resources in social ecologies.</li> </ul>

As Ungar (2011, 2013) maintains, social ecologies are responsible for providing the necessary resources for young people to achieve functional outcomes. However, the responsibility lies with the individual to demonstrate agency, negotiate, and engage with their environments to foster positive outcomes. The participants in this study fostered academic resilience in the following ways:

Firstly, the participants demonstrated the ability to navigate their social ecologies whilst identifying which resources within these ecologies would be of most value to achieve the desired positive outcomes. Discerning supports that are of value from those of less value appeared prevalent. This can be observed in the decision to avoid risk-taking behaviours or align with religious behaviour expectations. The children in this study were further able to observe supportive adults' positive characteristics and behaviours across their social ecologies to identify achievement patterns. This dynamic is reflected in studies that advocate the importance of parental-figure influence on teaching resilience strategies (see Ross, 2016; Theron & Van Rensburg, 2020). This ability to identify positive role models of achievement and align their values and behaviours in contextually relevant ways helped the participants to navigate their social ecologies with the 'evidence' that such commitment to achievement paid off. One participant valued education as a vehicle to success based on her mother and her maternal uncle's belief that education opens opportunities for future success and how this commitment to education may entail sacrifice. A second participant observed first-hand how valuing education could move one from a place of hardship to a place of success. Another learner could identify the value of learning from her foster father. She perceived his efforts as exemplary of a disciplined mindset of bettering oneself regardless of presenting challenges. This alignment with lifelong learning meant that the participant was not

satisfied with achieving the required standard but pushed herself beyond what was required based on intrinsic motivation to be her best self. A fourth participant identified her peer support head as a strong, unapologetic female succeeding at living an authentic life. This participant could accept her sexual orientation unashamedly; this motivated her future aspirations to be successful and to help others in need. She was able to reframe herself as an authentic and self-accepting person.

Achievement was not simply restricted to the educational ecology. These learners sought to achieve across social contexts. In this way, the values associated with achievement in one context were replicated in other domains, which appeared to synergise achievement. An example of this can be seen in one participant's use of music as an additional vehicle for success that transferred from her extra-curricular and home environments to the school. This learner achieved recognition outside the educational context (e.g., Eisteddfods), which were recognised in both home and school contexts and came with positive reinforcements. At home, her foster family created a music room to reward her efforts and support further development, whilst at school, she received accolades and bursaries. This trajectory was similar to that of most of the participants: Apart from academic achievements, one participant received acknowledgement in sport, another received accolades in art, while another became active in leadership and peer promoter groups. The participants also used mechanisms of achievement as mental health coping strategies. Notably, participants' non-academic skills were used to cope with distress, anxiety, and depression. Art, music, sport, and helping behaviours were identified as creative avenues that helped children make meaning of suffering and hardship.

Secondly, children negotiated for resources through bartering and reciprocal service transactions with adults. Notably, the participants made efforts to reinforce relationships with adults within their social ecologies. More significantly, those adults who were in positions to permit them to take home leftover art supplies, who could offer additional running tips, organise Eisteddfods and allocate leadership roles. Negotiation for resources involves a reciprocal transaction between the person and their environment. Bartering services for resources, assisting teachers and adults, and offering support to romantic and friendship relationships in times of need are negotiation strategies that increases the likelihood of reciprocity and mutual support. It can be said that framing adverse experiences is also a negotiation of benefit-finding from seemingly negative experiences. It can be the case that for individuals, the tendency to frame experiences as 'bad' without finding meaning is all too easy. These participants demonstrated a means of reframing hardship to glean life lessons and better understand themselves.

Finally, the participants engaged with personal, relational, structural, and spiritual/cultural aspects of their ecologies to overcome adversity and foster resilience building. There has been a steady increase in anxiety-specific symptoms related to school children's academic performance. UNICEF South Africa (2021) outlined how some 65% of school children present with mental health challenges. Among the fears of youth, key concerns included poverty and a lack of hope for the future, which correlated with the increase in childhood anxiety. Many children at schools in South Africa perceive that their futures hold adverse outcomes. Statistics tend to agree with these fears, with even 40% of educated children struggling to find employment (Stats SA, 2021). The youth of South Africa tend to hold a pessimistic view of future outcomes to the extent that even education is no longer seen as a

significant protective factor against risks. However, the four participants in the study continued to view education as a vehicle for better future outcomes and a means to move beyond the difficulties experienced in the present. Theron (2020) maintained that resilient children were likelier to perceive education as the route to a better future. Moreover, Weseley et al. (2017) identified hopeful agency and future aspirations as keys to positive academic outcomes. It is clear from the analysis of the current study that the participants demonstrated a commitment to education as the pathway to better outcomes and confidence and hope that their future would be better than the present.

One of the most significant global challenges in recent memory affected South African schoolchildren in March 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic is a challenge that has not been faced in nearly a century. Silbert and Mzozoyana (2021), in the UCT online news, described in their article titled *Youth in the firing line of COVID-19 mental health pandemic* how South African youths experienced significant distress over the pandemic period. The WHO (2022) reports a 25% increase in anxiety among children since the start of the pandemic. Silbert and Mzozoyana relate that school children were essentially cut off from the various adult figures at schools who support them, while and peer relationships also suffered. One can infer that the diminished access to resources within the educational social ecology contributed to the rise in mental health challenges. Children across South Africa faced a new (or additional) adversity previously unseen in their lifetimes. However, they were cut off from the many and varied protective mechanisms within their various social ecologies that may have helped to buffer against the threat.

A theme from the current research identified engagement during difficulty rather than avoidance thereof: All the participants described a belief in their capacity to

progress and move past threats. Moreover, they evinced a positive mindset toward setbacks. Rather than seeing adversity as threatening, the participants observed challenges as a means to learn a skill, get stronger, make meaning, and test faith.

Relational aspects of resilience building are demonstrated in the reciprocal transactions of the participants with parents, role models of achievement, and teachers. Among the factors uncovered from the cross-case synthesis, peer influence was reported as necessary for school engagement.

The current study highlighted the importance of romantic relationships. Two participants indicated the value of their romantic partners as contributing to academic achievement, whereas the other two listed peer programmes (sports teams, peer societies) as protective mechanisms. A contemporary influence is a connection with online peer support. Information and communication technologies (ICT) have become an artefact of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and have played an essential role in fulfilling developmental needs during adolescence (see Gottschalk, 2019; Louw & Louw, 2022; Suler, 2005). These needs include identity experimentation and exploration, separation from parents and family, intimacy and belonging, venting frustrations, mastery and competence. All four participants ensured that the connection with their peer support (face-to-face or online) was consistent and accessible.

A child's capacity to engage in schooling is complex and socio-ecologically informed (D'Angelo & Kaye, 2018). A school may provide the necessary resources, but not all children of adversity will necessarily seek out and interact with these resources to foster academic resilience. The participants in this study had at least one teacher or coach with whom they could interact and who contributed to their resilience process. In turn, these participants' willingness to interact and be agents of their resilience processes resulted in a reciprocal process; therefore, teachers and

coaches were more engaging. Other forms of relational influence, such as a parent, foster parent, grandparent(s), family member, or any other significant adult who served as a motivational force or role model, also played a role in these participants' resilience processes. Ultimately, this study agrees with contemporary South African resilience research that advocates for stronger (and reciprocal) social relationships in supporting better academic outcomes (see Kumpulained et al., 2016; Liebenberg et al., 2016; Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012; Theron et al., 2022).

### **6.3 Contributions and Strengths of the Study**

This section deals with the gaps in knowledge identified earlier in the literature review and how these were addressed to demonstrate the strengths of the study and contributions to the body of knowledge on children's resilience-building processes.

#### **6.3.1 Addressing Current Trends in Resilience Research**

It has been argued that resilience research in South Africa does not mirror international progress in conceptualising resilience as a transactional process. Despite progress in the resilience field among South African researchers (such as Adrian van Breda, Linda Theron, Linda Liebenberg, Tamlyn Jefferis, Angelique van Rensburg, and Sebastiaan Rothmann) who formulated studies on social-ecological and transactional frameworks of resilience, many others continue to study resilience from outdated conceptualisations (Van Rensburg et al., 2015). Few studies explored resilience across settings, whilst others focused mainly on structural adversities (i.e., poverty in under-resourced areas) and protective factors such as personal (e.g., coping and hardiness) and relational (e.g., support structures) enablers rather than on resilience processes. Local studies tend to favour single-setting environments (e.g., schools, universities, occupational environments) and do not consider the role of various other social ecologies associated with the transactional dynamic of

resilience building. Consequently, other potential areas of resilient achievement, where individuals may be evincing successful outcomes and drawing on social-ecological supports, may be under-investigated due to the limited focus on single-setting contexts. Based on my contention that adversity occurs in all walks of life, among all racial groups, in all socio-economic classes, and among children of all ages, I focused on adolescents who experienced various forms of adversity which challenged their developmental outcomes but who ultimately demonstrated better than expected outcomes. I grounded the adversities in four main groups: biological vulnerabilities, specific negative life events, challenging social and physical environments, and compound socio-demographic risks (see Van Rensburg et al., 2015). This provided structure to demarcate the inclusion criteria for this study, which created an opportunity to elicit various diversities. This prompted an investigation into the resilience enablers in these children's lives and their ways of engaging with their environments.

The social ecology of resilience theory (SERT) has been widely used as a leading framework for understanding resilience processes globally. To date, South African studies conceptualising resilience through this framework are scant (see Van Breda and Theron, 2018). I proposed a conceptual model (see Figure 5.1) for understanding the complex dynamics that embody the resilience-building processes of children who achieve academically against the odds.

This research adds to the body of resilience studies that advocate for a social-ecological approach to understand the various adversities children may have to contend with and to comprehend the resilience processes they employ to overcome these. Like many other studies, the focus of this study was on evincing educational resilience, as education is one of the most salient ecologies in children's lives.

Therefore, positive educational outcomes are imperative for future economic empowerment and personal success (Adegoke & Steyn, 2017; Mtapuri & Tinarwo, 2021; Van Breda & Theron (2018). Furthermore, the reciprocal transactions between individuals and their various ecological environments to co-facilitate resilience-building processes have been elucidated to strengthen local studies on academic resilience further.

### **6.3.2 Addressing the Need for Qualitative Case Study Methodology**

Case study research methodology has garnered interest in various disciplines as researchers began to realise its potential to "illuminate phenomena through a detailed study of their occurrence in a particular context" (see Mills et al. 2010, p. xxxi). As mentioned in Chapter 2, psychological case studies have been a research method since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, due to the advent of experimental and psychometric approaches, the scientific character of case studies has never been explored thoroughly, while case studies have often been neglected or completely ignored in textbooks or have been called by other names (see Starke & Strohschneider, 2010; Yin, 2018). However, the strength of case study research in Psychology is that it provides a rich database and procures process information. This means the researcher can gain a detailed picture of individual processes and reveal critical individual differences between several cases. In addition, case studies may prevent the over-simplification of matters, since they do not only take the broad structural or demographic variables into account to reconstruct the *how* and the *why*, but also the "insider's view" (i.e., the involved persons) as well as the external view of the researcher (Starke & Strohschneider, 2010).

This study used a qualitative multiple-case study design to uncover the detailed processes by which at-risk learners foster academic resilience. This design allowed

the researcher to analyse the data within each case and across cases. This cross-case synthesis uncovered unique themes and in-case patterns common to the participants that would not have been possible through a less flexible, quantitative enquiry. Moreover, this synthesis contributed to the theory building for the social ecology of resilience framework (SERT).

In circumstances where so many contextual variables play a role in how children foster resilient outcomes, the case study is helpful in both understanding and learning about children's social-ecological processes of resilience building. Few doctoral studies in Psychology have undertaken this approach as it is often seen as either too vague or lacking in rigour. Therefore, it is a strength of this study to demonstrate how case study research can benefit the psychological scientific community and encourage further such studies.

### **6.3.3 Addressing the Philosophical Stance of Qualitative Case Study Research**

As noted in Chapter 3, philosophical position of the case study researcher determines the ontological and epistemological characteristics of the research design. However, since various streams (i.e., quantitative and qualitative designs) inform case study research, both positivists and non-positivists employ it. This has created misunderstandings and challenges, resulting in difficulty in understanding case study research and undermining the strength of case study research. Therefore, various authors argue for a clear exposition of the case study researcher's philosophical position. This should align with the researcher's worldview and the aim of the study (see Bhatta, 2018; Harrison et al., 2017).

Since the aim of my study held both realism (positivist) and constructivist (non-positivist) positions, I followed a constructivist realism approach as an alternative ontology. The constructivist lens allowed me to accept the research participants as

meaning-makers in their own lives who essentially construct their own realities. It also allows the interaction between the researcher and the subject. The realism leaning allowed me to be objective and, therefore, to follow the guidelines of scientific rigour, such as including a structured process and assuring the credibility of the research (see Cupchik, 2001; Starman, 2013; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2018).

It is, therefore, my contention that following a constructivist realism epistemology addresses much of the confusion and challenges regarding case study research and can therefore be regarded as a strength of this research.

#### **6.3.4 *The Social-ecological Spiritual/Cultural Processes of Resilience-building***

The present study addressed a gap in the paucity of research surrounding children's spiritual/cultural resilience-enabling processes. Van Breda and Theron (2018) identified four salient categories of resilience enablers in South Africa, including the spiritual/cultural aspects of resilience building. The authors criticised the limited exploration into these spiritual/cultural mechanisms for understanding resilience. Culture, which includes the aspects of children's beliefs, customs, values, and language, dictates resilience processes and moulds the meaningfulness of resources for children (Panter-Brick, 2015). Consequently, resilience mechanisms can be said to be relative to the culture in which children are embedded. Notably, Van Rensburg and colleagues (2019) maintain that the underlying processes of resilience facilitate adaptative outcomes that differ from culture to culture.

Given the rich diversity in culture and spirituality in South Africa, it is surprising that few studies have sought to uncover how children engage with these spiritual/cultural processes to foster resilient outcomes. Studies have shown how the meaning individuals attach to their resilience-enabling resources and opportunities also differs from person to person (see Masten, 2018; Ungar, 2012). Significantly,

Van Rensburg et al. (2019) describe that within the social ecology of resilience theory (SERT), the importance of resources and opportunities depends on the cultural and contextual appropriateness of meaning. Therefore, the resources and opportunities available to children must be culturally and contextually relevant. When these protective mechanisms are relevant and resonate with the socio-cultural values these children have been socialised to respect and enact, children are more likely to use the resources and find meaning in them.

The participants in the current study attached significant meaning to the cultural/spiritual processes of resilience. For two children, Christianity within the rural African context informed resilience processes. Here, the children could appropriate resources from family members who shared their faith, and from churches to support resilience-building and make meaning from their hardships. Prayer and belief in a higher power were essential for these children's positive aspirations of a better future.

Additionally, the culture of groups that resonated with values relevant to the two other participants also framed meaning for challenges. Participants could identify characteristics among specific online communities that shared common values and beliefs that were not as accessible within their immediate social ecologies. These communities shared a culture that resonated with the participants and helped them to attach meaning to their unique differences and challenges. For one participant, the identification with a minority and oppressed community (e.g., LGBTQ+) helped her to increase social engagement and spur advocacy in support of vulnerable others. For the other participant, online social media groups with similar artistic interests validated her own uniqueness.

Notably, the artefacts created by the four participants mainly reflected Westernised objects (e.g., running shoes, movie camera, piano, LGBTQ+ pin). However, a closer look into the artefacts includes the integration of independence and interdependence. According to Ramphela (2012), traditional African communities are more likely to value interdependence and socialise children toward this value. This value may contrast with a more Westernised pursuit of independence as a goal for development. While two of the participant's backgrounds were rooted in rural/township African communities, all four participants reflected an acknowledgement of agency and independence as well as relational interdependence.

For one participant, her running shoes embodied the solitary pursuit of personal discipline and perseverance in attaining achievement. In contrast, her second artefact included her mother, co-sharing the achievement as depicted in the joint lifting of a trophy that represented success. Another participant included someone climbing a rainbow ladder that reflected the LGBTQ+ culture. This artefact reflects the personal journey of progress whilst acknowledging the importance of the community as the rungs that permit the person to use their strength to overcome the darkness of the present. One participant used a movie camera as her artefact and described that she and her boyfriend would co-create the story of their future lives together. At the same time, she also presented a single animation character as a depiction of her unique characteristics as a resilient child. Another participant depicted a musical instrument to illustrate her talent and future aspirations. Her worldview of never giving up was reflected in a drawing of a tree that kept on sprouting new branches despite being chopped down to curb its growth. Additionally,

she called herself an "Anglo-isiXhosa princess" to illustrate the integration of Western and traditional African values.

### **6.3.5 Contribution to Theory Building**

Theory building emerged as an additional contribution of the current study following engagement with the data. The theoretical propositions underpinning the present study are associated with the social ecology of resilience framework postulated by Ungar (2011; 2012), which continues to develop in the South African context (see Theron, 2020; van Breda, 2017; Van Rensburg et al., 2019). Consequently, these theoretical propositions helped to explain resilience and support theory building for SERT as a framework for understanding how children transact resources and opportunities within their social ecologies in culturally and contextually meaningful ways. This study, therefore, supported the contention that children's active engagement with the enablers provided by their different ecologies is essential in facilitating and establishing resilience.

### **6.4 Limitations of the Study**

Although this study yielded a more detailed understanding of South African children's social-ecological academic resilience processes, this contribution should be read against the following limitations:

Firstly, this research was not intended to take an additional eighteen months. However, March 27, 2020, presented a new challenge for this doctoral candidate that involved trying to negotiate a research project amid a global COVID-19 pandemic. I initially recruited a sample of ten prospective participants in February 2020 who had indicated their intention to participate in the study. Four of these prospective participants were Grade 12 learners. Once the lockdown began, access to participants and gatekeepers became a significant challenge. One by one,

participants dropped out of the study. By the end of that year, once school had resumed regularly, the school-based support teams (SBSTs) appeared to be less interested in accommodating research projects. It may be that they had a new set of challenges to navigate. It was required that I begin recruiting participants the following year in 2021. It took eighteen months to secure the participants for the present study.

However, in some ways, this process presented adversity for me as the researcher. I, too, am engaging in an academic task made more complex by a specific negative life event (the pandemic). I had doubts that the research would be able to regain momentum and whether the schools would allow the research to continue. I also had concerns about how the pandemic might affect academic results (including the validity thereof) or whether participants who had met the criteria for inclusion prior to the lockdown may no longer meet academic criteria post-lockdown. Thankfully, two participants from the original cohort were joined by two new participants, and the number of participants could be reduced to four without negatively affecting the data. This was an additional benefit as, in hindsight, the original sample of ten prospective participants would have been far too many to manage and was unnecessary due to the likely oversaturation of data.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity to add a layer to the research as this specific negative life event had undoubtedly changed the ways children might engage with their social ecologies to continue achieving academically. It was further of interest to note that all four participants who achieved academically pre-COVID-19 continued to achieve after that. Despite the limitations imposed on access to learning, teachers, peer support programmes and auxiliary programmes, these learners evinced creative problem-solving to ensure that they could continue

achieving similar results in the face of new adversity, which has already been shown to have negatively impacted children across the globe.

Secondly, the female-only research participant group was also not an aim and purpose of the study. However, schools did not identify male prospective participants post-COVID-19. Notably, two male Grade 12 participants were identified prior to the onset of the pandemic; however, these two learners could not be included once the lockdown commenced and schools closed. This does raise questions about how the pandemic affected gender differences in coping with the effects of the pandemic. Once the schools indicated availability to accommodate the study, prospective males did not appear to meet the inclusion criteria. One reason for this may be the way urban parents emphasise principled lifestyles less with boys than girls. Pelo (2018) describes that this may be associated with the notion that girls are more at-risk and therefore require more guidance. The result is that boys then engage more frequently in risk-taking behaviours that diminish positive outcomes.

Thirdly the purpose of this study was based on three propositions (in the form of research questions), while the theoretical orientation was the social ecology theory of resilience. The guiding principle for this decision was the literature review on resilience, which helped formulate an implicit theoretical supposition in methodological orientation, participant selection, data gathering and data analysis. However, I was also aware that while this provided a blueprint for the study, there could also be a paradox to theory and a too-structured approach. I, therefore, tried to heed Diane Vaughn's (1992, p. 195) wise words: "The paradox of theory is that at the same time it tells us where to look, it can keep us from seeing."

## 6.5 Implications and Recommendations

This study holds value for mental health services providers, teachers, parents, caregivers, and communities to serve children by facilitating 'custom-made' social-ecological resilience support initiatives that are culturally and contextually relevant to children at risk. In this way, children are most likely to appropriate meaning to the resources and opportunities within their social ecologies. It is then the prerogative of these environments and ecologies to help children co-facilitate meaningful support to overcome adversity. Where these resources may be few, service providers can be tasked with assisting social ecologies in creating socio-culturally relevant resources/opportunities available to children in adversity. A practical way of operationalising resilience-enabling processes may include tailor-made individualised resilience plans for children at risk in which social ecologies can outline and monitor the mechanisms available within a child's specific social ecologies and help to enhance their transactions within these ecologies. A database of resilience enablers (i.e., personal, relational, structural, and spiritual/ cultural) could be developed to ensure that these are promoted. Service providers can encourage those resilience-enabling processes identified in this and similar studies by encouraging processes that can help children identify and develop aspirations for a meaningful future, participate in extra-curricular activities, encourage teacher-learner, child-caregiver, and peer interactional reciprocity, and embrace spiritual/cultural aspects into various facets of their lives.

This study has found the role of social ecologies to be significant in how children navigate, negotiate, and engage with resilience processes. The education ecology provides many resilience-building opportunities for children. Frawley and colleagues (2014) maintain that schools can afford vulnerable children a safe and welcoming

environment from risks in their homes and communities. One implication may be for service providers to use the local schools as sites for service provision. According to Kieling et al. (2011), lower-middle-income countries like South Africa tend to utilise school ecologies for mental health services to assist needy children. A necessary resilience-enabling process identified in the current study was described in the co-facilitation of resources/opportunities between children and auxiliary programmes at such schools. In these auxiliary ecologies based at school (i.e., sports teams, peer promoter groups, art clubs, and music clubs), children in the current study identified salient supports. This implies that schools can offer more than just academic curriculum support for children but also opportunities that speak to alternative personal skills and attributes where children can demonstrate achievement and access relational support from peers and adults who share specific interests. This capacity to evince achievement across settings within the educational context appeared to bolster further academic engagement among the children in the current study. Thus, by creating alternative opportunities for achievement, children may appropriate meaning to academic success. As Hart et al. (2016) describe, the prevailing idea is that resilience-based knowledge can influence broader adversity contexts. By uncovering the rich, detailed processes of how children transact with their social ecologies to use resources, similar co-facilitation-focused programmes can be developed to help children in other non-academic contexts.

According to Shepherd (2016), the context for studying academic resilience in South Africa is dissimilar from other countries, given the relationship between the learners' school and home environments. Typically, schools in South Africa are often better resourced than children's home environments. It has already been described how many children in South Africa experience challenging social and physical home

environments (i.e., gangsterism, violence, substance abuse, parent absenteeism); however, the schools that participated in the present study were better situated to provide better resources. This allowed the study to, in some way, indicate how a supportive environment, like the educational ecology, can help learners at risk overcome adversity. In such an ecology, teachers make themselves accessible to young people, actively listen and engage with learners, are empathetic, and schools advocate for the support of learners (see Jefferis & Theron, 2017). What may require further investigation is the differences and similarities in how gender influences transactions between children and their social ecologies in South Africa. Further studies into male-specific academic resilience at the secondary schooling (adolescent) level are recommended. Previous SERT studies (see Van Breda and Theron, 2018) involving male-only participants considered street-involved children rather than those already in resourced schools.

The home ecology also plays a vital role in how children adopt resilience-enabling strategies and use resources to overcome adversity. When parents can show their children how to navigate adversity, they have blueprints for negotiating for resources that can promote better outcomes. Theron and van Rensburg (2020) describe how children at risk can learn to regulate their behaviour from parent figures. Parents teach/coach their children how to overcome adversity. One way parents do this is through modelling achievement. According to Phasha (2010), parental figures advance collective pride by using educational qualifications as a means to change outcomes. It was demonstrated how participants acknowledged the positive processes of role model caregivers who modelled specific behaviours aligned with achievement. For one participant, a mother's sacrifice to leave home and study further for potential access to a better future was honoured by the child and fostered

pride. This same participant also identified a maternal uncle's strategies correlating with achievement such that his advice was taken as a guide to success. A child's capacity to identify the personal resilience enablers of adults in the home appears to be a pivotal factor in the replication of such a process by the child in other contexts. Another participant observed and valued the positive behaviours of her foster father, whom she described as a "life-long learner". The child respected and valued the parent figure's choice to continue learning and developing and wished to adopt his practices.

## **6.6 Concluding Remarks**

This study sought to uncover how children experiencing adversity navigated their social ecologies. Moreover, the processes by which these children at risk co-facilitated protective mechanisms to mitigate adversity between person and environment was key to understanding how these children produce better than expected academic outcomes. This study was motivated by a need to address the risks associated with academic fallout for many children in South Africa. The educational context is one of the most salient ecologies in children's lives.

Suppose children are to thrive (rather than survive). In that case, society's prerogative is to ensure they can navigate and negotiate resources in their social ecologies to help them through their scholastic careers. Nelson Mandela aptly identified education as the salient key to opening opportunities for the children of South Africa. Key South African researchers in the resilience field have all advocated that parents/caregivers, teachers, other support figures, and communities focus on the educational environment as a critical ecology for adolescents to foster resilience.

This study adopted a qualitative multiple case study research methodology, which allowed me to access the rich experiences of the participants; this would not have been possible with quantitative measures.

### **6.7 Personal Reflection**

On a personal level, this journey has been an inspiring one. I am indebted to my supervisor, whom I perceived as having gone above and beyond her call of duty to support me in this endeavour. Additionally, working with these participants has helped me recognise those mechanisms I utilised as a learner experiencing adversity. This research has helped me reframe some personal experiences and attach meaning that has been both helpful and enlightening. Much of the narrative I created for overcoming adversity occurred post-adversity. I have typically recognised the processes I undertook following the significant challenges in my life rather than recognising how I recruited support from my social ecologies and used resources during these challenges. This additional perspective has helped me to make meaning of the hardships and validate that past self I have spent years "getting away from".

The process has also encouraged me to continue my studies within the resilience field. I have found that my clinical practice has also been influenced by the insights generated from the process. Much of my work involves child therapy and psychoeducation with parents. My focus has shifted from advocating the mitigation of threats to encouraging parents to help their children foster resilience. This focus is an integral part of parenting that has recently lost favour. Parents seem overly focused on ensuring their children do not encounter threats. They go to incredible lengths to buffer against any circumstance that might initiate anxiety or displeasure in their children's lives. We often refer to such parenting as 'helicopter parenting'. I

have noticed a secondary type that I have coined 'lawnmower parenting'. These parents are not content with just hovering about their children, ready to intervene at the first sign of trouble, but instead prematurely set out to remove all potential risks before they even emerge. In this way, children are deprived of the adversity necessary to build resilience. The outcome is typically separation anxiety from the parent who is perceived as the saviour and diminished self-efficacy as the child has no experience of overcoming challenges. This child does not have confidence in their ability to manage challenges and develops learned helplessness. I believe that the current research findings demonstrate that the focus is best when it is targeted at teaching children how to navigate threats rather than avoiding or preventing them altogether. Suppose parents can both model resilience and coach children on how to identify resources and negotiate for protective mechanisms across their social ecologies. In that case, they promote resilience to help children independently navigate life's challenges. This process is helpful to parents too, who can witness their children effectively overcoming adversity, thus reducing anxiety related to fears over whether their children will survive the complexities of life.

The nature of anxiety is that it catastrophises. Anxiety seeks to identify the potential threats (be these psychological or other) and then attempt to problem-solve based on limited (and increasingly irrational) data. The result is to try to control for adverse outcomes so that one might avoid having to experience them. This is the opposite of resilience theory which requires adversity as a prerequisite. Individuals who plan on overcoming adversity by avoiding it are less likely to recognise their capacities beyond avoidance. However, by practising engagement with the resources within social ecologies, one is more likely to develop an assuredness that

one can overcome threats in the future. This was the case for the participants in the study.

I have enjoyed communicating the findings of this research with my wife (and in-laws). I am encouraging them to allow my son, Jack, to experience normative difficulties rather than running to his aid at every sign of discomfort. I have seen how this approach has assisted my family in taking a calmer approach as they see my son fall, cry, recover and precede with his play without the intervention of helicopter and lawnmower adults. This gives me confidence that Jack will learn to overcome adversity. Our focus is now on helping him locate and use resources that will serve him for many years and support healthy coping and mental well-being.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: University of the Free State Ethics Committee Approval



#### GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

30-Nov-2019

Dear Mr Channon, Dane DP

#### Ethics Committee feedback

Research Project Title:

**Academic resilience of children who overcome adversity.**

With reference to your application for ethical clearance for your research: Find attached the letter and decision from the GHREC meeting.

Ethics Admin

205 Nelson Mandela  
Drive  
Park West  
Bloemfontein 9301  
South Africa

P.O. Box 339  
Bloemfontein 9300  
Tel: 051 401 9398 /  
7619 / 3682  
[RIMS@UFS.ac.za](mailto:RIMS@UFS.ac.za)  
[www.ufs.ac.za](http://www.ufs.ac.za)



#### GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

29-Nov-2019

Dear Mr Channon, Dane DP

#### Conditionally Approved

Research Project Title:

**Academic resilience of children who overcome adversity.**

With reference to your application for ethical clearance for your research: it has been determined by the General/Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State that this research is ethically sound and may receive full ethical approval after the following provision(s) have been attended to:

- Conditionally approved pending the submission of the permission letter from the Eastern Cape Department of Education to the GHREC before commencing with data collection.

Please attend to the abovementioned within sixty (60) days. Failure to respond or make prior arrangements within this time will result in your application being withdrawn (terminated). Please note:

**This is not a valid ethical approval until you (the applicant) have attended to the above mentioned provisions and the ethics committee has validated them.**

Yours sincerely

**Prof Derek Litthauer**

**Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee**

Digitally signed  
by Derek  
Litthauer

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Derek Litthauer'.

Date: 2019.11.29  
16:01:45 +02'00'

205 Nelson Mandela  
Drive  
Park West  
Bloemfontein 9301  
South Africa

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## Appendix B: Department of Education Permission to Conduct Study



STRATEGIC PLANNING POLICY RESEARCH AND SECRETARIAT SERVICES  
 Steve Yule Tshwete Complex • Zone 6 • Zwelitsha • Eastern Cape  
 Private Bag X0032 • Bisho • 5605 • REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA  
 Tel: +27 (0)40 608 4691/4773 • Fax: +27 (0)86 742 4942 • Website: [www.ecdoe.gov.za](http://www.ecdoe.gov.za)

Enquiries: B Pamla Email: [babalea.pamla@ecdoe.gov.za](mailto:babalea.pamla@ecdoe.gov.za) Date: 22 January 2020

Mr. Channon Dane Paul  
 7 Salvia Place  
 Vincent Heights  
 East London  
 5247

Dear Mr. D Channon

### **PERMISSION TO UNDERTAKE DOCTORATE STUDY: ACADEMIC RESILIENCE OF CHILDREN WHO OVERCOME ADVERSITY.**

1. Your application to conduct the above mentioned research involving 10 learners, 10 educators and 5 schools in the jurisdiction of Buffalo City in the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) is hereby approved based on the following conditions:
  - a. there will be no financial implications for the Department;
  - b. you will make all necessary arrangement concerning your research;
  - c. institutions and respondents must not be identifiable in any way from the results of the investigation;
  - d. all ethical considerations are adhered to;
  - e. you seek parents' consent for minors;
  - f. it is not going to interrupt educators' time and task;
  - g. the research may not be conducted during official contact time, including school breaks, but an arrangement to do research at the school after school hours may be arranged and agreed upon in writing with the Principal and the affected teacher/s;
  - h. you present a copy of the written approval letter of the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) to the Cluster and District Directors before any research is undertaken at any institutions within that particular district;

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- i. should you wish to extend the period of research after approval has been granted, an application to do this must be directed to Chief Director: Strategic Management Monitoring and Evaluation;
  - j. your research will be limited to those institutions for which approval has been granted, should changes be effected written permission must be obtained from the Chief Director: Strategic Management Monitoring and Evaluation;
  - k. you present the Department with a copy of your final paper/report/dissertation/thesis free of charge in hard copy and electronic format. This must be accompanied by a separate synopsis (maximum 2 – 3 typed pages) of the most important findings and recommendations if it does not already contain a synopsis.
  - l. you present the findings to the Research Committee and/or Senior Management of the Department when and/or where necessary.
  - m. you are requested to provide the above to the Chief Director: Strategic Management Monitoring and Evaluation upon completion of your research.
  - n. you comply with all the requirements as completed in the Terms and Conditions to conduct Research in the ECDoE document duly completed by you.
  - o. you comply with your ethical undertaking (commitment form)
  - p. You submit on a six monthly basis, from the date of permission of the research, concise reports to the Chief Director: Strategic Management Monitoring and Evaluation
2. The Department reserves a right to withdraw the permission should there not be compliance to the approval letter and contract signed in the Terms and Conditions to conduct Research in the ECDoE.
  3. The Department will publish the completed Research on its website.
  4. The Department wishes you well in your undertaking. You can contact the Director, Ms. Ny Kanjana on the numbers indicated in the letterhead or email [nelisa.kanjana@ecdoe.gov.za](mailto:nelisa.kanjana@ecdoe.gov.za) should you need any assistance.

  
 NY KANJANA  
 DIRECTOR: STRATEGIC PLANNING POLICY AND RESEARCH  
 FOR SUPERINTENDENT-GENERAL: EDUCATION

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## Appendix C: Parent/caregiver Information and Consent Form



### RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION LEAFLET AND PARENTAL/CAREGIVER CONSENT FORM

#### TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Academic resilience of children who overcome adversity.

#### PRINCIPLE RESEARCHER'S NAME AND CONTACT INFORMATION:

Dane Channon: 060 366 5019 / channon.psychologist@gmail.com

#### FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Faculty of the Humanities  
Department of Psychology

#### STUDYLEADER(S) NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Prof Anet Louw, Prof Dap Louw, and Prof Karel Esterhuyse  
(051) 401 2188

#### WHAT IS RESEARCH?

Research is something we do to find new knowledge about the way people think, feel and behave. We use research projects or studies to help us find out more about people and the things that affect their lives. Basically, research is the process of collecting information in an attempt to answer a question. This process involves the use of acknowledged methods and guidelines. The information gathered is then analysed in order to provide some answers to the research question.

#### WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH PROJECT ALL ABOUT?

This research project is about positive change. It is about improving the positive outcomes of young people in South Africa by finding ways of both keeping them in school, as well as achieving positive academic results that can be a springboard for future success in adult life. We want to explore and describe how children continue to achieve better-than-expected academic outcomes despite hardships in their lives. This means that despite potentially risky and adverse conditions such as poverty, crime, unstable home environments and so forth, that potentially have a role to play in high dropout rates and low academic performance, some children continue to achieve the proposed academic outcomes. We, as the research team, wish to know how these children do this.

#### WHY HAS YOUR CHILD BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Your child has been invited to take part in this study because we, as the research team, as well as his/her school, selected him/her as someone who shows academic resilience. Your child appears to be an individual who continues to produce the results needed to progress in his/her education despite certain difficult experiences (current or past) that likely may have hampered other children. Your child appears to show the ability to bounce back and achieve positive academic outcomes. We, as the research team, would like to understand and describe how he/she accomplishes this.

#### WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

I, Dane Channon, a counselling psychologist working within the Eastern Cape shall be doing the research. This research will be undertaken in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of the Free State as a requisite module for the completion of the Doctorate in Child and Adolescent Psychology qualification (DPsych).

#### **HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?**

This study is in the process of receiving approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the UFS. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher once this is available.

**Approval number: \*to be confirmed\***

#### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOUR CHILD IN THIS STUDY?**

Please know that your child is free to decide for him-/herself whether he/she wishes to take part in this study. Your child will take part in three interviews over a period of three months. This would include approximately one interview every 3-4 weeks. Interviews will take place at his/her school directly after normal school hours on a convenient day for him/her. The interview will be a one-on-one discussion (unless a translator is required to assist with interpretation across languages). Interview questions will cover general background information; how he/she uses his/her personal abilities; and how he/she finds and uses supportive people and resources/tools within his/her various environments and within him/herself to overcome difficulty whilst still meeting positive academic outcomes.

#### **CAN ANYTHING BAD HAPPEN TO YOUR CHILD?**

The interviews will be conducted by a professional, registered counselling psychologist in a caring and sensitive manner. Interviews will be conducted in a relaxing and non-invasive way. In this way, the interviews are more reflective of an everyday conversation. Your child is free to withdraw at any stage before, during or after the interview process and can choose to answer questions at his/her own discretion. Should your child need to discuss anything that he/she may be concerned about, another psychologist will be made available to him/her. Details of the psychologist are as follows: Christelle van Tonder, (043- 735 4672). All information is confidential and safeguarded to ensure that your child's privacy is respected and maintained throughout the process.

#### **CAN ANYTHING GOOD HAPPEN TO YOUR CHILD?**

The benefits for children participating in this research project is that it provides an opportunity for their voices and stories to be heard. However, the main aim of this research is to understand the processes involved in fostering academic resilience in children. This means that your child has the opportunity to take part in a positive study that may benefit many South African children in the future.

#### **WILL ANYONE KNOW YOUR CHILD IS PART OF THE STUDY?**

The nature of this research is completely confidential. This means that your child's name, as well as any information that could possibly lead to his/her identification, are completely separate from the information he/she provides in the interview sessions or from visual artefacts (such as drawings, clay modelling or photographs) used during the interview. All information will be handled by myself. My supervisor and the external data coder will only have access to the answers given by children, not their personal information. All personnel with access to information in the study will sign confidentiality agreements to protect your child's information. The study may be published as part of a journal article, but at no time will any identifying particulars be used in any of these materials.

#### **WHO CAN YOU TALK TO ABOUT THE STUDY?**

Should you wish to obtain more information on the study, or be informed of the findings of the research, you may contact me telephonically (060 3665019) or by email (channon.psychologist@gmail.com). Should you have any concerns regarding any part of the study, please contact my supervisor, Prof Anet Louw, 083 391 8332, Louwae@ufs.ac.za.

**WHAT IF YOU DO NOT WANT YOUR CHILD TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. This means that there is no incentive, reward or obligation to take part. You may simply indicate that you do not wish your child to participate. If you do decide that you want your child to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. Please note, that if your child does not wish to take part in the study, this is his or her choice, and should be respected.

Yours sincerely

Dane Channon

Date: September 2019


**PLEASE RETURN**

Name of child: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Parent/Caregiver: \_\_\_\_\_

- ✓ Do you understand this research study and are you willing to let your child take part in it?  
Yes  No
- ✓ Has the researcher answered all your questions?  
Yes  No
- ✓ Do you understand that you can withdraw from the study at any time?  
Yes  No
- ✓ I give the researcher permission to make use of the data gathered from my child's participation.  
Yes  No

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Parent/Caregiver**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

## Appendix D: Child/learner Information and Consent Form



### RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION LEAFLET AND LEARNER CONSENT FORM

#### TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Academic resilience of children who overcome adversity.

#### PRINCIPLE RESEARCHER'S NAME AND CONTACT INFORMATION:

Dane Channon: 060 366 5019 / channon.psychologist@gmail.com

#### FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Faculty of the Humanities  
Department of Psychology

#### STUDYLEADER(S) NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Prof Anet Louw, Prof Dap Louw, and Prof Karel Esterhuyse  
(051) 401 2188

#### WHAT IS RESEARCH?

Research is something we do to find new knowledge about the way people think, feel and behave. We use research projects or studies to help us find out more about people and the things that affect their lives. More specifically, we gather information about a specific question or topic in a systematic way. We then use specific methods and guidelines to investigate these questions or topics in order to understand how people function.

#### WHAT IS THE AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The aim of the study is to explore the ways in which academically resilient children, that is, children who achieve the academic goals for their respective academic curriculums, are able to locate and use resources in their social environments in order to assist them in achieving the academic outcomes despite significant hardships. That is, we wish to investigate and describe how you continue to meet the academic requirements at school, despite certain challenges in your life (be this in the past or present) that might have resulted in other children failing to meet the academic outcomes.

#### WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

I, Dane Channon, a counselling psychologist working within the Eastern Cape, shall be doing the research. This research will be undertaken in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of the Free State as a requisite module for the completion of the Doctorate in Child and Adolescent Psychology qualification (DPsych).

#### HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

This study is in the process of receiving approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the UFS. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher once this is available.

**Approval number: \*to be confirmed\***

### **WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?**

You have been invited to take part in this study because your school selected you as someone who shows academic resilience. You appear to be an individual who continues to produce the results needed to progress in your education despite certain difficult experiences (current or past) that in all likelihood may have hampered other children, yet you appeared to show the ability to bounce back and achieve positive academic outcomes. We, as the research team, would like to understand and describe how you did, and continue to do this.

### **WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?**

Please know that you are free to decide for yourself whether you wish to take part in this study. Your role in this study is to take part in three interviews over a period of three months. This would include approximately one interview every 3-4 weeks. Interviews will take place at the school directly after normal school hours on a convenient day for you. The interview will be a one-on-one discussion (unless a translator is required to assist with interpretation across languages). Interview questions will cover general background information, how you use your specific personal abilities, and how you find and use supportive people and tools within your specific environments to overcome difficulty in order to continue meeting your academic goals. During the interview you may be asked to supplement your answers with drawings, clay modelling, photos, poetry song and dance, or other media of your choice.

### **CAN THE PARTICIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?**

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you can simply indicate as such. There are no penalties or punishments for anyone who does not wish to take part, neither are there rewards for anyone who does wish to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. Should you indicate that you would like to participate, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

**WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** The direct benefits for learners participating in this study is an opportunity to have their voices heard and have their stories told. In addition, the information gathered may help researchers better understand how to support children in order to help them achieve the best academic results that they can despite difficulties experienced in their lives.

### **WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

Participants will need to take part in three separate interviews. These interviews may take between 40 and 60 minutes depending on the content of the interview. These interviews will require you to remain after school on a day that is suitable for you and does not interfere with your extra-curricular activities. One interview will be conducted with one of your teachers – who will be asked to describe your strengths and processes in achieving academically. One interview will also be undertaken with your parent(s)/caregiver(s). You will not be required to be present in the interviews with your teacher and parent(s)/caregiver(s).

### **WILL WHAT I SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

Confidentiality is of high importance in this study. This means that your name, as well as any information that could possibly lead to your identification, are completely separate from the information and any visual artefacts (e.g. drawings, photos) you provide in the interview sessions. All information will be handled by myself. My supervisor and the external data coder will only have access to the answers given by you, but not your personal information. All personnel with access to information in the study will sign confidentiality agreements to protect your information. The study may be published as part of a journal article or research report, but at no time will any identifying particulars be used in any of these materials.

**HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?**

Hard copies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office of East London for future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. All collected information from both hardcopy surveys and the electronic device used in the interview will be completely destroyed (shredded and erased) after the five-year period.

**WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?**

There will be no direct incentive or reward for taking part in the study. There are also no financial costs for the participants involved.

**HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY?**

Should you wish to obtain more information on the study, or be informed of the findings of the research, you may contact me telephonically (060 366 5019) or by email (channon.psychologist@gmail.com). Should you have any concerns regarding any part of the study, please contact my supervisor, Prof Anet Louw, on 083 391 8332 or email Louwae@ufs.ac.za

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.**

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report.

I agree to the recording of the survey and/or interview.

I agree that any visual artefacts may be used as illustrations in the scientific report or journal article as needed.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Full Name of Researcher: **Dane Channon** \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Nelson Mandela Drive/Ryalaan, Park West/Parkwes, Bloemfontein 9301, South Africa/Suid-Afrika P.O. Box/Posbus 339, Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa/Suid-Afrika, T: +27(0)51 401 9111, [www.ufs.ac.za](http://www.ufs.ac.za)

## Appendix E: Principal Consent



### REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

#### Dear Principal

I should like to request permission to conduct research at ..... School

#### TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Academic resilience of children who overcome adversity.

#### PRINCIPLE RESEARCHER'S NAME AND CONTACT INFORMATION:

Dane Channon 060 366 5019 / channon.psychologist@gmail.com

#### FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Faculty of the Humanities

Department of Psychology

#### STUDYLEADER(S) NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Prof Anet Louw, Prof Dap Louw, and Prof Karel Esterhuysen  
(051) 401 2188

#### WHAT IS THE AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The aim of the study will be to describe how at-risk learners from various backgrounds transact with their various ecologies (e.g. personal, social and physical environments) in order to develop academic resilience (achieving academic outcomes for school despite significant lived adversity). Furthermore, the study aims to describe how these at-risk children achieve better-than-expected academic outcomes in the ways they negotiate for resources in their personal, social, structural, cultural and spiritual contexts that assist their scholastic careers.

#### WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

I, Dane Channon, a counselling psychologist working within the education sector of Eastern Cape, shall be doing the research. This research will be undertaken in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of the Free State as a requisite module for the completion of the Doctorate in Child and Adolescent Psychology qualification (DPsych).

#### HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

This study is in the process of being approved by the Research Ethics Committee of UFS. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher once final approval has been obtained.

**Approval number: \*to be confirmed\***

#### WHY IS YOUR INSTITUTION INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Academic resilience involves a learner's capacity to achieve positive academic performances and outcomes despite the significant adversity and life difficulties within their social, physical and personal environment(s). Since schools are academic institutions, having the study take place in the school provides the best opportunity to fulfil this exploration. Five secondary schools have been selected in East London. We are aiming to include Grade 10-12 learners and teachers to take part in the study as

we believe these learners are most likely to evince academic resilience having successfully negotiated previous phases of their academic careers.

#### **WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?**

Selected learners and teachers are free to volunteer their participation for the study and are not obligated in any way to take part. Learners will be identified by the school based on the inclusion criteria provided by the research team (a copy of the criteria is attached herewith). Learners will then participate in a three-part interview process over the period of three months (preferably between January 2020 and March 2020 so as not to interfere with exam terms). The base class teacher (or teacher who is most familiar with the learner) will also be invited for a voluntary single interview. All interviews would preferably be undertaken at the school directly after school hours so as not to take up valuable teaching and learning time. The study aims to include 8-10 participants in total across five schools. This means that once schools have identified learners who meet the criteria, the research team will evaluate all potential learners from the five schools and select 8-10. Thus, the number of participants per school can range between 0 and 10 learners depending on selection. Learners' parents/caregivers will be contacted should they be selected, and once consent has been given to the research team, schools will be contacted, and an appropriate time arranged to conduct interviews with said learners. Teachers will also be contacted, and their consent obtained to partake in the study. This will include a single interview that will take place either directly after school, or within an admin period suitable for the teacher.

#### **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

The main benefit for the learners is that their stories and voices will be heard. In addition, the information gathered may help researchers better understand how children can be better supported by their social ecologies (e.g., schools) in order to help them achieve the best academic outcomes despite difficulties experienced in their lives.

#### **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There are confidentiality risks given that the study would make use of the information required to select participants. The school-based support team (SBST) of each participating school will assist the research team by identifying potential participants based on their acquired knowledge of learners and perusal of collateral information such as Edlabs. This information will always remain safeguarded at the schools and researchers will not have direct access to them. The school's name will not be used in the study, and therefore, any publishable information cannot be linked with the school. The real names of the participants will also not be used and thus the information they provide in the interviews cannot be linked with their identifying particulars. My supervisor and the external coder will have access to the data, but no identifying information which could lead back to the school or participants will be used. The research team will contact parent/caregivers with the description that their child has been selected to voluntarily participate in the study due to their academic resilience. A psychologist will be available for the children should it be necessary for them to be debriefed.

#### **WILL THE INFORMATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

Confidentiality is of high importance in this study. This means that the names of learners and teachers, as well as any information that could possibly lead to their identification, is completely separate from the information they provide in the interviews. Furthermore, the name of the school will also not be used, but rather, a pseudonym code will be attributed. All information will be handled by myself. My supervisor and the external data coder will only have access to the answers given by the participants, but not their personal information in the interviews. All personnel with access to information in the study will sign confidentiality agreements to protect participants' information – this includes teachers involved in selecting participants. The study may be published as part of a journal article, but at no time will any identifying particulars be used in any of these materials.

**HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?**

Hard copies of interview transcripts will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office of East London for future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. All collected information from both hardcopy surveys and the electronic device used in the interview will be completely destroyed (shredded and erased) after the five-year period. No identifying particulars of schools or names of participants will be kept.

**WILL THERE BE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?**

There will be no direct incentive or reward for taking part in the study. There are also no financial costs for the participants involved.

**HOW WILL THE INSTITUTION BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY?**

Should you wish to obtain more information on the study, or be informed of the findings of the research, you may contact me telephonically (0603665019) or by email (channon.psychologist@gmail.com). Should you have any concerns regarding any part of the study, please contact my supervisor, Prof Anet Louw, on 083 391 8332 or email Louwae@ufs.ac.za.

## Appendix F: Teacher Information and Consent Form



### RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION LEAFLET AND TEACHER CONSENT FORM

#### TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Academic resilience of children who overcome adversity.

#### PRINCIPLE RESEARCHER'S NAME AND CONTACT INFORMATION:

Dane Channon: 060 366 5019 / channon.psychologist@gmail.com

#### FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Faculty of the Humanities  
Department of Psychology

#### STUDYLEADER(S) NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Prof Anet Louw, Prof Dap Louw, and Prof Karel Esterhuysen  
(051) 401 2188

#### WHAT IS RESEARCH?

Knowledge about how people think, feel, and behave is acquired by means of research. Basically, research is the process of collecting information in an attempt to find an answer to a question or a phenomenon. It is therefore an active and systematic process of inquiry where certain acknowledged methods and guidelines are followed. The data collected is then analysed in order to answer the research question.

#### WHAT IS THE AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The aim of the study will be to investigate how at-risk learners from various backgrounds transact with their various ecologies in order to develop academic resilience despite significant adversities. More specifically, the study aims to describe how these at-risk children achieve better-than-expected academic outcomes in the ways they negotiate for resources in their personal, social, structural, cultural and spiritual contexts to assist them in their scholastic careers.

#### WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

I, Dane Channon, a counselling psychologist working within the education sector of the Eastern Cape, shall be doing the research. This research will be undertaken in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of the Free State as a requisite module for the completion of the Doctorate in Child and Adolescent Psychology qualification (DPsych).

#### HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

This study is in the process of being approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the UFS. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher once final approval has been obtained.

**Approval number: \*to be confirmed\***

#### WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

You have been invited to take part in this study because as a teacher, you have relational experience with the identified participant learner and are therefore in a position to add value to understanding how this child is able to achieve academic outcomes despite adversity (past and/or present). As a teacher, you are also part of the same structural ecology (school) in which this child evinces academic resilience and are therefore likely to have special insights into how the child negotiates his or her environment.

#### **WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?**

Please know that you are free to decide for yourself whether you wish to take part in this study. Your role in this study is to take part in a once off, one-on-one interview with myself (researcher). This interview will take place at the school, at a time of your choosing so as not to disrupt your teaching/admin time. The interview may take approximately 45 minutes to 60 minutes and questions will be asked about your observations and insights into how the learner in your class is able to achieve academic outcomes despite challenges that may otherwise have resulted in failure to pass.

#### **CAN THE PARTICIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?**

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you can simply indicate as such. There are no penalties or punishments for anyone who does not wish to take part, neither are there rewards for anyone who does wish to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form.

#### **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There are no direct benefits for teachers participating in this study, but the information gathered may help researchers better understand how children can be better supported by their schools in order to help them achieve the best academic results that they can despite difficulties experienced in their lives. In addition, children will be provided an opportunity to have their voices and stories heard.

#### **WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

You will be required to take part in a 40-minute to 60-minute interview with the researcher directly after school (or within a free period during school hours if this is more suitable for you). In this way, you will be giving up approximately one hour of your time.

#### **WILL WHAT I SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

Confidentiality is of high importance in this study. This means that your name, as well as any information that could possibly lead to your identification, is completely separate from the information you provide in the interview session. All information will be handled by myself. My supervisor and the external data coder will only have access to the answers given by you, but not your personal information. All personnel with access to information in the study will sign confidentiality agreements to protect your information. The study may be published as part of a journal article or research report, but at no time will any identifying particulars be used in any of these materials.

#### **HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?**

Hard copies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office of East London for future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. All collected information from the electronic device used in the interview will be completely destroyed (shredded and erased) after the five-year period.

#### **WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?**

There will be no direct incentive or reward for taking part in the study. There are also no financial costs for the participants involved.

**HOW WILL THE PARTICIPANT BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY?**

Should you wish to obtain more information on the study, or be informed of the findings of the research, you may contact me telephonically (060 366 5019) or by email (channon.psychologist@gmail.com). Should you have any concerns regarding any part of the study, please contact my supervisor, Prof Anet Louw, 083 391 8332, Louwae@ufs.ac.za.

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.**

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report.

I agree to the recording of interview and collateral data collection.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement. I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Full name of researcher: **Dane Channon** \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Nelson Mandela Drive/Ryalaan, Park West/Parkwes, Bloemfontein 9301, South Africa/Suid-Afrika P.O. Box/Posbus 339, Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa/Suid-Afrika, T: +27(0)51 401 9111, www.ufs.ac.za

## Appendix G: Interview Schedule



### Interview Schedule

Each interviewing schedule will have the following three parts: **(1) The opening:** rapport building (i.e. getting to know the child and building trust); overview of interview objectives; reminder of confidentiality and voluntary nature of participation; collecting background information. **(2) The body:** questions related to how the child negotiates for resources to assist him/her in their scholastic careers; how they engage with their various contexts to develop academic resilience; developing a deeper understanding of the child's stories. **(3) The closing:** summarizing the salient content from the interview; giving the child an opportunity to discuss and clarify information or to contribute additional perspectives; discussing the next course of action; thanking the participant).

Table of expected interviews:

This table reflects the procedure for each of the 4-5 cases

Participant	Anticipated Length of Interview	Anticipated Date
Parent/Caregiver Interview	40mins – 60 mins	January, 2020
Teacher Interview	40mins – 60 mins	January, 2020
Child Interview Phase 1	40mins – 60 mins	February, 2020
Child Interview Phase 2	40mins – 60 mins	March, 2020
Child Interview Phase 3	40mins – 60 mins	April, 2020

## Appendix H: Semi-structured Interview Questions – Parent/caregiver



The initial interviews will focus on the parent's/caregiver's perception of a child's unique adverse circumstances. However, the main focus of the interviews will be on how the children navigate their social ecologies to achieve positive academic outcomes; how they negotiate for resources to assist them in their scholastic careers and how they engage with their various contexts to develop resilience. The semi-structured interview questions will follow after a thorough rapport-building phase. The following basic questions will be used to formulate further questions around the information provided by the interviewees to develop a deeper understanding of the children's stories.

1. Describe, to your knowledge, some of the most challenging events, circumstances or difficulties that your child has (or had) in his or her life (e.g. challenging social and physical environments; specific negative life events; socio-demographic risks; biological vulnerabilities).
2. Why do you think some children may overcome these challenges and become successful, while others from similar backgrounds/with similar difficulties do not?
3. How do you think your child manages to achieve positive academic outcomes despite his/her adverse circumstances/difficulties?
4. What personal attributes or characteristics do you think your child possesses that may help him/her to stay on course with his/her academic studies?
5. How does your child interact with others (e.g. caregivers / teachers / friends / classmates / authority figures) in his/her environment?
6. How do these interpersonal interactions provide support/resources for your child?
7. To your knowledge which type of environment does your child favour? (e.g. school, home, friends, sports, church/spiritual gatherings, family/cultural rituals and customs; arts and culture.)
8. How do this/these environment(s) provide support/resources for your child?
9. How may interpersonal and environmental support and resource structures contribute to the child's academic achievement?

10. Does your child seek out resources to help him/her in his/her academic tasks? How does he/she seek out these resources? What type of resources does your child typically seek out?

## Appendix I: Child/learner Semi-structured Interview Protocol



### Semi-Structured Interview Questions – Child (Learner)

The initial focus of the interviews will be for the participants to describe their adverse circumstances. However, the primary focus of the interviews will be to investigate how children navigate their social ecologies to achieve positive academic outcomes; how they negotiate for resources to assist them in their scholastic careers and how they engage with their various contexts to develop academic resilience. The semi-structured interview questions will follow after a thorough rapport-building phase. The following basic questions will be used to formulate further questions around the information provided by the participants to develop a deeper understanding of their stories. Visual artefacts (e.g. writing, drawings, clay modelling, poetry) will also be used during this process. Children will be given choices in the media that they would like to use and may provide the researcher with additional artefacts, such as photos, videos and audios in the follow-up interview to strengthen their stories. Care will be taken that the child's narratives take precedence.

1. What difficulties have you had to overcome in your life? Draw your 'river of life', starting from birth to five years into the future. Draw and write down or tell me what difficulties you have had to deal with along this river of life, or are still dealing with at the moment. Draw and write down or tell me how you see your life five years from now.
2. What has helped you to do well in your life and at school so far, even though you face difficulties? Please make a drawing/build a clay model of what has helped. Write down or tell me about your drawing/clay model.
3. Make a drawing/make a clay model of yourself. Write down or tell me how you view yourself: Name five adjectives to describe yourself. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? What motivates you?
4. Describe/draw/model how has these qualities have helped you to overcome your difficulties and achieve academic success.
5. Make a drawing/clay model of the people that are important in your life. Write down or tell me why these persons are important to you. What have these persons said/or done to help you in your life?
6. Make a drawing/clay model of your world. Include those places (with drawings /writing/clay modelling) that are important to you. Write down or tell me about these places and how they have helped you in your life and in your school work.
7. Make a drawing/clay model of the things (events, family traditions, cultural traditions, spiritual/religious events or rituals) that have helped you to overcome difficulties in your life and help you to achieve success at school.
8. Draw/write/model or tell me what you do or how you get help when you struggle with something.
9. What, do you think, makes you different from other children who suffer the same difficulties? Why are you more successful than these children?
10. Is there anything that you would like to draw/model/tell me or do (e.g. dance, sing act out) that you think is important and that I have not asked you about?

## Appendix J: Teacher Semi-structured Interview Protocol



### Semi-Structured Interview Questions – Teacher

The initial interviews will focus on the teacher's perception of a child's unique adverse circumstances. However, the main focus of the interviews will be on how the children navigate their social ecologies to achieve positive academic outcomes; how they negotiate for resources to assist them in their scholastic careers and how they engage with their various contexts to develop resilience. The semi-structured interview questions will follow after a thorough rapport-building phase. The following basic questions will be used to formulate further questions around the information provided by the interviewees to develop a deeper understanding of the children's stories.

11. Describe, to your knowledge, some of the most challenging events, circumstances or difficulties that the child has (or had) in his or her life (e.g. challenging social and physical environments; specific negative life events; socio-demographic risks; biological vulnerabilities).
12. Why do you think some children may overcome these challenges and become successful, while others from similar backgrounds/with similar difficulties do not?
13. How do you think this child manages to achieve positive academic outcomes despite his/her adverse circumstances/difficulties?
14. What personal attributes or characteristics do you think the child possesses that may help him/her to stay on course with his/her academic studies?
15. How does the child interact with others (e.g. caregivers / teachers / friends / classmates / authority figures) in his/her environment?
16. How do these interpersonal interactions provide support/resources for the child?
17. To your knowledge which type of environment does the child favour? (e.g. school, home, friends, sports, church/spiritual gatherings, family/cultural rituals and customs; arts and culture.)
18. How do this/these environment(s) provide support/resources for the child?
19. How may interpersonal and environmental support and resource structures contribute to the child's academic achievement?
20. Does the child seek out resources to help him/her in his/her academic tasks? How does he/she seek out these resources? What type of resources does he/she typically seek out?

## Appendix K: Inclusion Criteria Brief



### INCLUSION CRITERIA BRIEF

The aim of the study will be to describe how at-risk learners from various backgrounds transact with their various ecologies (e.g. personal, social and physical environments) in order to develop academic resilience (achieving academic outcomes for school despite significant lived adversity). Furthermore, the study aims to describe how these at-risk children achieve better-than-expected academic outcomes in the ways they negotiate for resources in their personal, social, structural, cultural and spiritual contexts that assist their scholastic careers.

- ✓ Inclusion criteria are characteristics that the prospective participants must have in order to be included in the study.
- ✓ Exclusion criteria are characteristics that disqualify prospective participants from inclusion in the study.

The following criteria will be used to identify potential participants for this study:

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Learners in FET phase of secondary schooling (Grades 10, 11 or 12).	Learners below FET phase of secondary schooling (Grades 8 or 9).
Learners who have passed every year of their academic schooling career.	Learners who have been retained (failed an academic year).
Learners who <b>have</b> experienced/experience significant risks associated with one or more of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Challenging social and physical environments</b> – e.g., community violence, gangsterism, high exposure to pollution, no access to health-related resources.</li> </ul> AND/OR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Specific negative life events</b> – e.g., the death of a parent, parental divorce, abuse, neglect, abandonment, severe bullying, substance abuse.</li> </ul>	Learners who <b>have not</b> experienced/experience significant risks associated with one or more of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Challenging social and physical environments</b> – e.g., community violence, gangsterism, high exposure to pollution, no access to health-related resources.</li> </ul> AND/OR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Specific negative life events</b> – e.g., the death of a parent, parental divorce, abuse, neglect, abandonment, severe bullying, substance abuse.</li> </ul>
AND/OR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Compound sociodemographic risks</b> – e.g., poverty, unemployed parents/caregivers, single-parent/caregiver family, child-headed household, poor schooling, poor parenting/caregiving.</li> </ul>	AND/OR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Compound sociodemographic risks</b> – e.g., poverty, unemployed parents/caregivers, single-parent/caregiver family, child-headed household, poor schooling, poor parenting/caregiving.</li> </ul>
AND/OR	AND/OR

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Biological vulnerabilities</b> – e.g., disability, disease, premature birth, learning disorders, low intellectual ability.</li></ul>	<b>Biological vulnerabilities</b> – e.g., disability, disease, premature birth, learning disorders, low intellectual ability
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Once learners who meet the inclusion criteria have been identified, a short, motivational writeup will be required as to why these learners have been recommended for inclusion.

Yours sincerely

Dane Channon

Date: September 2019



## Appendix L: Transcription Services Confidentiality Agreement

Date: 20 March 2022

To whom it may concern

### **Agreement Regarding Confidentiality of Transcription Data**

I, **Judy Page**, do hereby agree to ensure that all information made available to me by the researcher, Dane Channon, will be kept confidential and secure. All recordings received have been stored on a password protected and encrypted database. Moreover, no personal information on any of the participants have been stored.

I further agree to not share the data with any other persons.

Sincerely,

Ms Judy Page  
Psychometrist

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Judy Page', written in a cursive style.

## Appendix M: Research Supervisor letter



The Director  
Strategic Planning Policy and Research  
Eastern Cape Department of Education

Date: 24 September 2019

Dear Sir/Madam

**RESEARCH SUPERVISOR: MR DANE CHANNON**

This is to certify that I, prof Anet Elizabeth Louw, research fellow at the Department of Psychology, University of the Free State (staff number 0064246), has been appointed as the promotor of the research dissertation of doctoral candidate, Dane Channon. Mr Channon has completed his course work for the D.Psych in Child and Adolescent Psychology. His proposed research entails the academic resilience of children who overcome adversity. This research aims to explore how children of various adverse backgrounds and circumstances navigate and negotiate their individual, social and physical resources to accomplish favourable academic outcomes. This research could aid researchers and policy makers to better understand the processes and transactions involved in cultivating academic resilience. The research proposal has been approved by the research committee of the Department of Psychology. Approval for the research from the ethics committee of the University of the Free State is pending.

Kind regards

Prof A.E. Louw  
Research Fellow  
Department of Psychology, UFS  
[louwae@ufs.ac.za](mailto:louwae@ufs.ac.za)  
083 391 832



## Appendix N: TurnItIn Report

### ACADEMIC RESILIENCE OF CHILDREN WHO OVERCOME ADVERSITY

#### ORIGINALITY REPORT

<b>3</b> %	<b>3</b> %	<b>0</b> %	<b>2</b> %
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

#### PRIMARY SOURCES

<b>1</b>	<b>scholar.ufs.ac.za</b> Internet Source	<b>1</b> %
<b>2</b>	<b>Submitted to University of the Free State</b> Student Paper	<b>&lt;1</b> %
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<b>5</b>	<b>www.ufs.ac.za</b> Internet Source	<b>&lt;1</b> %
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7	<a href="http://oldweb.roundrockisd.org">oldweb.roundrockisd.org</a> Internet Source	<1 %
8	<a href="http://scholar.ufs.ac.za:8080">scholar.ufs.ac.za:8080</a> Internet Source	<1 %
9	<a href="http://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk">eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk</a> Internet Source	<1 %
10	Linda C Theron. "Researching resilience: lessons learned from working with rural, Sesotho-speaking South African young people", Qualitative Research, 2016 Publication	<1 %
11	<a href="http://www.nyiso.com">www.nyiso.com</a> Internet Source	<1 %
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youth resilience: Some gaps", South African Journal of Science,  
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May, Tim. "EBOOK: Social Research", EBOOK: Social Research,  
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