

# **Resilience: A Framework for Inclusive Pedagogy in a South African Context**

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**ABSTRACT:** The social ecology of resilience perspective sees resilience as the capacity of individuals to negotiate and navigate their pathways towards the resources that sustain well-being, the capacity of the individual's physical and social ecologies to provide resilience resources, and the capacity of individuals, families and communities to negotiate culturally meaningful ways to share health-promoting resources. This means that resilience is a process that involves an individual's own assets or strengths as well as those found in his or her physical social and ecology. Inclusive education, on the other hand, is a discipline that allows learners whose socio-economic circumstances, physical disability or poverty has become a barrier to their educational success to influence the outcome of the process of teaching and learning positively. This qualitative study of resilience and inclusion, which adopted structuration theory as a lens, was conducted in order to understand the resilience of three learners who achieved educational success in the face of great personal adversity. The participants wrote narratives on what enabled them to cope resiliently and the narratives were analysed in terms of a critical inductive and a structuration theory framework. The main findings show that resilience is an important process that allows learners with barriers to learning to do well. The participants benefitted from personal attributes such as a sense of agency, assertiveness, determination and self-confidence, as well as from social and academic support from their families, peers and teachers within an inclusive educational context.

**Key concepts:** Pedagogy; Teaching; Learning; Educational Success, Inclusion

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

After 1994, the South African government decided to implement inclusive education so as to make the education system responsive to the needs of learners experiencing barriers to learning. White Paper 6, published in 2001, provided policy guidelines for implementing inclusive education in schools (Department of Education [DoE], 2001). Since then research has been conducted with the aim of conceptualizing what it means to teach in an inclusive way (Makoelle, 2013). Various strategies and methods have been suggested in accommodating learners with diverse needs in the classroom. Schools in the mainstream, full service and special resource centres, which are the main categories of schools within the education system, have been flooded with learners in their classrooms in response to a call to open the doors of learning to all children. Both locally and internationally, research into the pedagogy of inclusion has focused mainly on two main aspects of an inclusive educational environment: teaching and learning. For instance, research in inclusive teaching has focused on which strategies, methods and assessment techniques could be appropriate for an inclusive pedagogy (Florian, 2007; 2009). Several studies have focused on the contribution the learners can make to the acquisition, processing and retention of knowledge within an inclusive pedagogic setting (Landsberg, Kruger and Swart, 2011). However, the literature indicates that few studies have actually explored the role of resilience in enabling learners to thrive psychologically, socially and academically despite the conditions they find themselves in within inclusive education settings. Therefore this prompted us to pose the following questions:

*What is the role of resilience in enhancing learners' abilities to thrive within an inclusive pedagogic discourse?*

*Which resilience factors enhance the accommodation of learners with diverse needs within an inclusive pedagogic context?*

In order to answer these questions, we needed to define the notion of resilience; conceptualize inclusion, and draw logical conclusions by analysing the narratives of resilient learners who had achieved academic success in the face of great personal adversity.

## 1.1 Conceptualising resilience and inclusion

Resilience remains a highly contested phenomenon despite the robust research that has been conducted into it over the past few decades. According to the ecological perspective, resilience denotes the individual's capacity to achieve positive outcomes despite the experience of adversity, to continue to function effectively in adverse circumstances, or to recover after significant trauma (Masten, 2001). This view regards resilience as the result of ordinary adaptive coping systems residing in the individual as well as in institutions that support well-being, for example families, schools, and community resources and services. These systems should be protected and well maintained for development to persist robustly despite the severe adversity sometimes experienced by an individual.

Resilience has ceased to be seen as an individual attribute that one may or may not have. Rather, resilience is acknowledged when individuals demonstrate the capacity to navigate and negotiate their pathways towards resilience-promoting resources which communities must be able to provide in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2011). This means that according to the social ecology of resilience perspective, resilience is a bi-directional phenomenon that relies on what is found within the individual and in his or her social and physical ecologies (Ungar, 2005; Theron, Liebenberg and Malindi, 2013). In this regard, a child combines personal strengths and resilience resources that meaningful relationships with caring and supportive parents, peers, teachers and communities provide in order for or her to be resilient. Donald, Lazarus, and Lolwana (2012, p. 159) therefore define resilience as “maintaining a balance between the stressors and developmental risks to which learners are exposed on the one hand, and the protective factors that might be operating for them on the other”. The protective factors that enhance resilience are divided, firstly, into *internal assets* such as intellectual, communication, decision-making and

problem-solving skills; positive self-concept, feelings of self-worth and confidence; a strong sense of autonomy, identity, purposefulness and positive values and beliefs; and a strong internal locus of control. Secondly, these protective factors are *external resources* from the immediate environment, which include a stable and consistent relationship with a caregiver, a supportive family that encourages competence, a network of peers, supportive significant others, and a supportive neighbourhood. However, ecological resources are beyond the reach of the majority of South African children, therefore some find it difficult to cope even in settings that are inclusive. It follows that it is crucial to strengthen learners' resilience when they are accommodated in inclusive settings.

Inclusive Education is geared towards providing education to all learners regardless of their background (Engelbrecht 1999; [2006](#); Makoelle, 2012). It is regarded as a process of widening the participation of learners within the pedagogic discourse. The international literature on inclusion is extensive and can be roughly divided into the following four types that focus on:

- curriculum and how it may act as a barrier to learning (Clough & Corbett, 2000);
- school improvement, whereby school organization is viewed as an educational area that may be used to foster inclusion (Ainscow, 2010; Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick and West 2012);
- disability, whereby the physical or psychological attributes of the learner render him or her a victim of exclusion (the hard-of-hearing learner);
- inclusive pedagogy (Florian and Kershner 2009; Florian and Linklater 2010).

Two views have dominated the debate around making pedagogy inclusive: *the medical model* views teaching and learning as effective strategies for the purposes of addressing and 'fixing' the learner's perceived medically diagnosed shortcomings; *the social ecological model*, which was developed as a critique to the medical deficit model, holds that the learner's social context forms is at the heart of accepting diversity and allowing participation of individuals regardless of their individual differences ([Reindal 2008](#); Ainscow and Cesar 2006; Makoelle 2012). More recent studies on inclusive pedagogy have demonstrated that inclusion is viewed from two dichotomous perspectives:

- pedagogy as it existed prior to changes is viewed by some as applying particular pedagogic strategies borrowed from special-needs discourse which predominantly uses the medical model as a point of reference to determine inclusivity within the framework of remedial education—that is, imputing deficiency to the learner;
- the strong view that inclusion must appeal to the creativity of the teacher in understanding the flexible nature of an inclusive pedagogic discourse to deal with the diverse needs of learners within an inclusive education settings.

These two dominant views in the pedagogic practice of inclusion place little emphasis on resilience as a fundamental feature in inclusion. What needs to be investigated is why, despite all the student support arrangements within the same pedagogic milieu, some learners thrive more than others academically.

The research literature on inclusion focusses largely on school structure, curriculum and pedagogy from a socio-ecological perspective and fails to investigate how learners cope within inclusive settings. This is particularly evident in the case of South African learners with diverse needs and from different backgrounds who have been admitted to schools with an inclusive policy.

Owing to the legacy of apartheid, the majority of learners in South African schools lack the institutional resilience needed to succeed. These learners include those with physical disabilities, those who have neurological and psychosocial problems, and those with a combination of the aforementioned factors. Such learners inevitably drop out of school unless they receive the kinds of support that they deserve.

The South African government adopted a policy of inclusive education in the year 2001 in order to extend academic and psychosocial support to all learners who are at risk. This policy eliminated discriminatory educational practices that characterised the dual system of education that was part of the apartheid system (Engelbrecht and Green 2001).

White Paper 6 became the blueprint for implementing inclusive education. Since then various changes have been implemented in line with the Vision 2020 ideal of seeing all South African schools become inclusive (Engelbrecht, Green, Naicker and Engelbrecht, 1999). The government started the process of transforming schools to become inclusive in their teaching and learning (Engelbrecht, Howell, and Bassat, 2002). Mainstream schools

have admitted learners with diverse needs, and processes are underway to develop full service schools that will serve a wider population of learners with different needs. Former special schools have been declared resource centres that will provide support to both full service and mainstream schools in their immediate vicinity. While there have been all these logistical changes towards the implementation of inclusive education, the process has been marred by various challenges such as a lack of resources and a lack of appropriate training for teachers for handling a diverse classroom. Therefore one is tempted to ask the following questions: What is resilience; how does it work; why are other learners more resilient than others and how does resilience support the agency of the learner within the constraining framework of the pedagogic education structure?

## **1.2 Theoretical framework**

In the study reported on in this article, Anthony Giddens's (1984; 2013) structuration theory was used as a lens to deconstruct the notion of resilience within inclusive educational discourse. Giddens proceeds from the premise that within every structure people act as agents and that their actions constitute their structural agency which, he purports, has the potential to transform and change the nature of the structure. However, it is also indicated that structure has a constraining effect on agents, which may influence the nature of individual agency within the structure. Therefore, the relationship between agents, agency and structure is a dual one, hence the notion of "duality". This principle was applied in the research study in the sense that the assumption was made that learners were present in the pedagogic educational discourse as structure and therefore used their agency to change and transform the structure. It is within this agency of learners that the core attribute of resilience is situated as discussed later in this article. By contrast, pedagogic educational discourse as structure has a constraining and controlling effect on the agents and therefore agency. Therefore, in exploring agency by learners as agents within the structure, the notion of resilience becomes crucial in illuminating the notion of learner "agency" and how this impacts on the transformation of the pedagogic educational discourse to become more inclusive. Therefore the duality between learner agency and pedagogic educational structure becomes fundamental in understanding the role of

resilience as a prominent aspect of inclusion, regardless of the conditions the learners find themselves in.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted qualitatively. Three learners participated in the study and were purposefully selected from a previously disadvantaged community. These learners had been academically successful despite the adverse conditions of poverty and economic deprivation facing them, and they had been admitted to the mainstream school in response to the policy of inclusive education.

Learner 1: Mike (pseudonym) is black male from a black township and lives with his single mother who works a domestic worker earning less than R600 per month. Mike is in a wheelchair;

Learner 2: Sophi (pseudonym) is a coloured female from a coloured township who lives with her unemployed father, mother and a younger sibling. The family depend for their survival on the state grant of her younger sibling. Sophi is hard of hearing and uses hearing aids.

Learner 3: Paul (pseudonym) is a black male from a black township who lives with his grandmother as both his biological parents are deceased. His grandmother supports him and two sisters from a pension grant. He is in a wheelchair.

Interviews were conducted with the three participants, voice-recorded, transcribed and analysed. The following question was posed to the three learners to solicit narrative responses: “Can you briefly explain why, despite your background, you still attain academic success?” A process of inductive analysis was used to analyse the data within the framework of the structuration principle of duality between the agent (the learner, agency, and the learner’s ability to learn despite his or her poor socio-economic conditions) and structure (socio-economic situation). The following questions were asked to guide the analysis:

How does learner agency relate to resilience and thus to academic success?

How do the learners use agency to overcome the constraining effect of their adverse conditions?

The two questions were asked to analyse the role of agency, the constraining effect of structure, and how the two play out in the narratives of the three learners. The following steps were followed in analysing the narratives (Laws, Harper and Marcus., 2003, p. 395):

Step 1: Reading and rereading all the collected data: The purpose of reading the data closely was to ensure that we were fully conversant with it, thus making the process of analysis more manageable.

Step 2: Drawing up a preliminary list of themes arising from the data: themes were then derived from the data to make the process more manageable.

Step 3: Re-reading the data several times helped to confirm the themes and verify that the interpretations were correct.

Step 4: Linking the themes to quotations and notes: we then wrote themes alongside the quotations and notes as I went through the data.

Step 5: Perusing the categories of themes to interpret them. In the course of analyzing the data, we attempted to answer the research questions.

Step 6: Designing a tool to assist in discerning patterns in the data. In order to triangulate and determine the patterns during data analysis, a spreadsheet was used which gave a summary of the themes. For example, the spreadsheet recorded the title of the theme and quotations from different sets of data.

Step 7: Interpreting the data and deriving meaning: During this stage, we read the quotations and derived the meanings they were indicating in relation to each of them. This resulted in my interpretations, which we presented according to each theme.

### 3. FINDINGS

In the course of analysing the narratives, two themes emerged: that is, *internal protective aspects* and the *external resources* that enhanced resilience in the learners. From the two themes a number of sub-themes were derived. The framework of Donald et al. (2012) for classifying the protective factors was used to guide the identification of themes from the data; therefore the sub-themes were generated.

#### **Theme 1 Internal protective aspects**

This theme addressed the innate aspects of the learners that enhanced their resilience within inclusive settings. The following sub-themes were identified:

*Sub-theme 1: Intellectual, communication, decision-making, social and problem-solving skills*

Analysis of the narratives revealed that the resilient learners were able to communicate and talk openly to others about their plight, thus providing a platform to share ideas about how best to deal with their current state of affairs; for instance, one learner stated: “I usually talk to different people about my situation; it helps because then you get different views about how to deal with your situation and one can choose between advices.” It was also apparent from the study that the resilient learners trusted their intellectual abilities, because one remarked: “I know I can succeed academically; I am not going to allow the situation to derail my progress.” The resilient learners showed signs of knowing what they wanted from life, how to take decisions to arrive there, and how to explore different solutions to their problems. For example, one remarked: “I try to take positive decisions about my future; for example, I have taken a stand that I need to work hard and invest in my future and, if things come my way, I will explore the best way to deal with the problem.”

*Sub-theme 2: A positive self-concept, feelings of self-worth and confidence;*

The analysis also indicated that the resilient learners had a positive image of themselves. They were quite aware of their abilities and confident that they could succeed despite the conditions they found themselves in, as one of the learners stated: “I am confident about what I can do; I believe in my ability to do well despite my situation.” This statement demonstrated that the resilient learners held themselves in high regard and thought they were in control of their own destiny.

*Sub-theme 3: A strong sense of autonomy, identity, purposefulness and positive values and beliefs;*

The analysis showed that the resilient learners were more independent in their quest for success and demonstrated the ability to be self-reliant, which is evident from the following statement made by one of the learners: “I do most of the things myself because I know hard work pays.” The statement also shows that the resilient learners had a positive value system and beliefs which influenced their motivation and their drive to do well despite their conditions. The fact that the resilient learners took full responsibility for doing

things for themselves showed their sense of purposefulness and resolve to do something about their current conditions.

*Sub-theme 4: A strong internal locus of control.*

The resilient learners seemed to exercise self-control, in private as well as at school. They appeared to be in charge of their work, as the following statement by one of the learners suggests: “I believe I am in charge of my destiny; no one can be blamed for failure but myself, while support from other people can help; but I am the one who must make a difference,” The statement demonstrates that the resilient learners had a strong locus of control, which was fundamental to their success.

**Theme 2: External resources**

This theme addressed the external resources that enhanced the participants’ resilience within inclusive settings. The following sub-themes were derived:

*Sub-theme 1: Stable and consistent relationship with the caregiver*

The study showed that the resilient learners had a stable relationship with their caregiver and that this relationship encouraged them to work harder despite the adverse conditions they had to deal with; for example, one of the learners remarked: “I succeed because [of?] my mom who is a single mother and I believe in one thing: we must stick together if we are to be successful. My mom likes me and I like her too.” This statement demonstrates the learner’s attachment to his mother, and it seems that this created a safe and secure environment for him to be successful.

*Sub-theme 2: A family with high expectations encourages competence*

It was evident from the study that the resilient learners were from families that had high expectations for their children, as one of the resilient learners argued: “I do well because my family does not settle for mediocrity; I can only do my best to prove them right.” This statement shows that the family expectations had a profound influence on the success of the learner.

*Sub-theme 3: The importance of a supportive family*

There was evidence to suggest that the families of the resilient learners were very supportive and contributed much to their success. For instance, one of the learners had the following to say in this regard: “I think if my family, Especially my two sisters, were not supportive to my endeavour to change my life for the good, I would not have made it

easy in this difficult circumstances” The statement suggests that family support was crucial for the learner to make success of the situation.

*Sub-theme 4: A supportive network of peers,*

The study has shown that resilient learners had around them a circle of supportive peers who provided aid during trying times, as one of the resilient learners indicated: “While I do most of the things myself, there are two of my friends who won’t leave me if I struggle; they are always there for me.” The indication is that for learners to be resilient, peer support is essential.

*Sub-theme 5: Supportive significant others*

The study demonstrated that the resilient learner participants derived courage from their teachers. In describing the importance of the support rendered by caring teachers, one of the resilient learners had this to say: “I think I have caring, loving and helpful teachers, which makes it easy for me to work and succeed in what I am doing at school; I can thrive in the situation because Mr X (pseudonym) always provide a helping hand.” The statement indicates that the support of teachers is crucial for learners to develop resilience.

*Sub-theme 6: A supportive neighbourhood.*

The findings of the study indicate that, while the learners were at school most of the time, their relationship with persons in the neighbourhood influenced their perception of themselves and how well they tried to do their best at school. For instance, one of the resilient learners said: “It is motivating to see people take interest in your well-being; for example, when I go home from school, I meet people who encourage me to do well, so that one day I can change the situation for myself and family—despite hardships, these are people who know who I am, where I am coming from and that I am capable of making a difference in my life.” The statement indicates that the resilient learners’ ecological environment added value to the level of resilience they developed.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

What follows is a brief discussion of the extent to which the findings of the study addressed the research questions. In each case, the research question is restated, followed by a discussion.

***Research question 1: What is the role of resilience in enhancing learners’ abilities to thrive within an inclusive pedagogic discourse?***

The study has demonstrated that resilience enhances the learner's ability to do well despite the presence of adverse conditions. For example, commenting from an ecological perspective, Masten (2001) postulates that resilience denotes the individual's capacity to achieve positive outcomes and function effectively in the face of adversity. This was confirmed by the study as the three learners from a poverty-stricken background achieved success in spite of the overwhelming odds they had to contend with. The study showed that resilience was a prerequisite for successful inclusion as the learners achieved academic success in an inclusive mainstream pedagogic setting despite their background of poverty and disability.

**Research question 2:** *Which resilience factors enhance the accommodation of learners with diverse needs within inclusive pedagogic discourse?*

The study confirmed that resilience is influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic protective factors. For instance, drawing on the social ecology of resilience perspective, Theron et al. (2013) and Ungar (2005) posit that resilience is a bi-directional phenomenon that relies on what is found within individuals and in their social and physical ecologies. The findings of the study confirm that the previously listed internal and external factors contributed to the resilience of learners and thus influenced their accommodation within an inclusive pedagogic context positively. The study found the following to be important as far as resilience and inclusion were concerned:

Internal assets such as intellectual, communication, decision-making and problem-solving skills; a positive self-concept, feelings of self-worth and confidence; a strong sense of autonomy, identity, purposefulness and positive values and beliefs; a strong internal locus of control;

External resources from the immediate environment—for example, a stable and consistent relationship with a caregiver; a family that encourages competence; a family that is supportive; a network of peers; supportive significant others, and a supportive neighbourhood (Donald et al., 2012). The findings confirm that the more resilient learners are, the better the chances that they will be successful within inclusive settings despite their adverse background and personal conditions.

Drawing on the structuration theory of [Giddens \(1984; 2013\)](#), the study confirmed that resilience strengthens the agency of agents within a constraining structure. It is evident

from this study that, for agency of the learners to constrain of the adverse conditions that they found themselves in, resilience was very significant. The study showed that when learners exercised their agency, they were able to make a positive impact on the constraints of the structure itself in that their resilience created a favourable atmosphere for them to thrive despite the negative circumstances. Therefore suffice it to argue that resilience impacts on individual agency, and thus agency influences the structure and creates favourable conditions for an individual to function effectively despite the adverse constraining conditions of the structure.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

While it could be ambitious to claim that all learners will be resilient when all intrinsic and extrinsic protective factors are prevalent in their ecological environment, it is reasonable to claim that the study demonstrated that resilience is fundamental for inclusion to happen. Resilience had clearly enhanced the accommodation of the severely challenged learners within the mainstream pedagogic discourse. It follows that for learners faced with adverse conditions to thrive within an inclusive setting, their resilience needs to be strengthened. We therefore recommend a resilience programme that can focus on the learners' internal protective factors as well as those deriving from the ecological environment. Finally, it is important to ensure that, within the learners' socio-ecological environment, stakeholders are empowered to assist them in their quest to overcome the adverse circumstances militating against their becoming resilient.

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