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# Agency, resilience and innovation in overcoming educational failure

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## Abstract

*This study seeks to understand how a group of boys in a Durban township achieved exceptional educational results despite the severe financial, social and educational constraints they faced. Their high school typified the worst failings of the South African educational system, but they achieved academic success in the matriculation and at university. Using resilience theory as a framework, it seeks to explore the strategies employed by the group and assesses the nature of their resilience. The group formed from a recognition that they were failing in their education. They responded by developing both individual and collective strategies to guide their learning. The strategies consisted of individual study, the debating of problems in their group, using whatever extra classes were available, locating material resources and taking on tutoring and teaching roles. The study draws on a series of interviews, focus group discussion and documentary evidence over the period 2011 to 2018. A thematic analysis of the data identifies four key themes: (1) Education and society have failed us (2) Responding to failure, we develop strategies and we appropriate resources (3) "Learning is within our blood" and (4) Our success. The only possible advantage the group enjoyed over their peers was that their families valued their education. In the process they developed confidence in their deep understanding of the subjects they studied and in their own intellectual capacity. It is argued that the principles they developed hold within them the potential for ongoing transformation of the systems that disadvantaged them. The significance of this study is that it demonstrates the need for officials, principals and teachers to value and support the capacity of young people in African contexts to achieve the fullest grasp of disciplinary knowledge.*

**Key words:** *resilience, agency, strategies, appropriation, African context.*

## 1. Introduction

A group of boys in a South African township school that failed to support their education developed highly successful strategies for their learning. This single case explores these strategies, which demonstrated considerable resilience and innovation in the face of adversity. The study speaks to a point made by Soudien (2012: 230) that, in thinking through the possibilities for moving beyond the well-known structures of racial and gendered inequality of South African

society and education, we have “insufficient empirical work on what strategies successful learners develop for themselves.”

To some extent these strategies can be seen as how most effectively to adjust one's responses to survive under adverse circumstances, but it is argued that these strategies went beyond that and had the potential for wider change.

The research questions that guide this study are:

*What pedagogical strategies enabled a group of young learners in a township school to succeed despite the failures of their schooling?*

*To what extent do these strategies offer hope for the transformation of the educational system?*

The article proceeds by discussing the methodology, research site and participants, including the record of their educational progress. It then presents key themes from the analysis. Finally, it considers the ways in which educators take into account the agency of learners and families in African contexts.

## **2. Resilience and resistance**

This study is framed by theories of resilience. More specifically with regard to human society, Ungar (2012: 387) defines resilience as referring “to the processes that individuals, families and communities use to cope, adapt and take advantage of assets when facing significant acute or chronic stress, or the compounding effect of both together.”

The study focuses on a context deeply marked by the history of oppression in South Africa, further, one in which the resources provided by the State are failing in their most basic of commitments, specifically with regard to education (Fleisch, 2008; Bloch, 2009). The adverse circumstances facing young students are the legacy of the past in terms of limitations of resources, geographical marginalisation and ongoing racial and class discrimination as well as more immediate and acute challenges, such as the impact of violence. In such a context, simply to maintain family and individual wellbeing may require innovative responses.

Research into resilience thus focuses on such responses of individuals and communities to stress. It can thus inform policies and practices that may work in tandem with the agency and assets of people facing adverse circumstances. Thus, the first research question asks what form the resilience of this particular group took. In doing so, there is a need for the study to take into account the specific cultural context in which this resilience is being exercised, in this case, a high school in a South African township. Ungar (2008: 218) proposes that “tensions between individuals and their cultures and contexts are resolved in ways that reflect highly specific relationships between aspects of resilience.” The implication for this study is that what schools may see as resilience may or may not cohere with what communities see as resilient, and that individuals may fashion forms of resilience that draw on both or neither.

I had noticed how African learners who had left school were assisting those in the following year with their studies, yet little of the literature on South African schooling focuses on the resources brought to education by learners. Beyond South Africa, critical race theory identifies the cultural capital that communities and learners bring to schooling (Yosso, 2005). Within the country, Fataar (2012; 2016) has drawn attention to the cultural capital of students from backgrounds of racial and economic disadvantage and has argued that schools should recognise and work with that capital. Theron (2013) has further focused on how students

drew on African cultural resources to enable their resilience within an education fraught with vulnerability and argues that “theorists should respect the competency-supporting potential of Africentric ways-of-being.” (Theron, 2013: 536). In Zimbabwe, Madzima (2014) has identified the role of *hunhuism*, a traditional belief system, as a factor in the academic success of working-class learners.

The common use of the concept of resilience, in particular in public policy, has though been criticised (Diprose, 2015) for promoting resilience as a proactive adjustment of people to situations that are inherently unjust, thus failing to grasp the need in contexts of inequality to transform social and economic relations. Katz (2004) argues for a distinction between reworking (acting to redistribute power and resources), resilience (taking steps to maintain supportive relationships, pursuing education) and resistance (providing alternatives that are critical of the status quo). Thus DeVerteuil and Golubchikov (2016) argue for a critical resilience that goes beyond adaptation and has the kernel of resistance. The implication for this study is whether the strategies adopted by the respondents do more than constitute successful adaptations to an unjust situation, coping rather than resisting, or whether within those strategies there is the potential for resistance.

The second research question thus aims to assess whether the strategies used by this group had within them the potential for further transformation of the system and were not simply ameliorative of the situation they and their families faced.

### 3. The study site

As a result of my familiarity with many people in the one township, which I refer to as Patonville, and my work on nonviolence in education, in 2009 I was asked by a student leader (whom I refer to as Sizwe) from Patonville High School to run a programme on addressing violence; the programme included both high schools in the area and another closer to the city centre. A residential workshop and subsequent shorter workshops were held with the student leadership. These workshops focused on students’ experience of violence. Rather than dealing with the formal curriculum, this programme aimed to develop students’ abilities to listen to each other and to reflect on their experiences.

The two schools are both in a historically African township in Durban. A centre of struggle against the apartheid system, the area is characterised by high levels of violence (Hemson, 2015). This is an area from which, each school day, primary and secondary students travel to get to schools that parents believe will offer them a greater chance of success, a pattern typical in areas with poor schooling across South Africa (Karlsson, 2007; Rogan, 2006).

Early in 2009 my godson had asked me to accompany him to register him at Patonville High School. We spent about an hour there before I told him that he would have to go to another school; the general atmosphere was one of chaotic confusion, with some teachers attempting to deal with student issues, while students milled around, some entering or leaving the property. Previously I had been asked by a student what they must do get teachers to teach them, and had raised the matter with the official heading the provincial Department of Education, whose response was that this was one of the most difficult schools with which he had to deal.

“The South African school sector can be characterised as a high cost, high participation, low quality system” (Taylor, 2008). South African education is constantly being scrutinised

for explanations as to why it fails so dismally compared to education in countries with far more limited resources (Fleisch, 2008; Bloch, 2009; Soudien, 2012: 226-230; Van den Berg, Taylor, Gustafsson, Spaul & Armstrong, 2011). Such failure of course has its roots in the racial inequality of South African history. Van den Berg et al. (2011: 2) refer to the “South African school system as effectively consisting of two differently functioning sub-systems...The majority of children are located in the historically disadvantaged system, which still serves mainly black and coloured children. Learners in these schools typically demonstrate low proficiency in reading, writing and numeracy.” Some of worst performing schools in the sub-system of historically disadvantaged are in urban townships, as is the case in this study.

Despite this, there are also accounts in the literature (Christie, Butler & Potterton, 2007; Taylor, 2008) of poorly provisioned schools in this sector that have nonetheless achieved well, through effective organisation and committed teaching. The school in this study is not an example of such schools. In 2009, for example, the majority of students who wrote the final matriculation examination failed (see below).

The majority of the students who attended the workshops wrote their final matriculation examination in late 2010. When Sizwe told me of exceptionally strong academic results in the examination by two groups of students, a boys’ group at the one school and a girls’ group at another (both are co-educational), I decided to explore what had led to this success. In 2011, I met with members of both groups. Unfortunately, the girls’ group soon dispersed physically and, as a result, it was not possible to continue the study with them. It was, however, noticeable how each group was single sex and how both groups had used similar strategies for their learning. The women’s group had named themselves *Imbokodo*, the grinding stone, an image frequently used to refer to women’s participation in the struggle for liberation. Thus, while the strategies of the boys’ group strikingly attest to the form in which they expressed their masculinity, there is nothing to suggest that these strategies were more effective because of their gender.

#### 4. Methodology

This study has drawn on data collected from the four participants who were in the boys’ group, with some additional data from contacts with educational officials, an interview with two former teachers at the school and an interview with Sizwe. The limited number of participants and the in-depth focus on the nature of the strategies and on the relationships that developed makes a primarily qualitative case study appropriate. Supplementary data from matriculation results for the individuals, as well as the data on pass rates at the school, introduces a limited quantitative element (Rule & John, 2011).

There were three focus group discussions with the participants in 2011 to 2012 and a series of phone calls and occasional meetings. Contact with all four has continued to the present, making it possible to track their careers after leaving school. For example, in 2017 two participants spoke at a leadership programme at Durban University of Technology on their role as young leaders.

The data covered a wide range of issues and experiences related to their educational history; analysis of data took the form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This began with coding of key terms; for example, the words “fail” and “failure” were used repetitively, and further analysis led into the development of themes.

Ethical clearance was obtained from Durban University of Technology and permission to conduct research at the school was given by the Department of Education. The names used for the area, the school and the participants are pseudonyms. A more complex ethical and methodological issue has been the difficulty of maintaining a research focus while also being called on to assist one or other of the group. For example, in attempting to advise on the development of a tutoring business two participants started, or trying to resolve bursary problems for another. However, by the time I met them, the group had already developed their pedagogical strategies, so my involvement did not influence that, while the additional contact has provided opportunities for further discussion.

## 5. The participants and their progress

The research participants I have named as Nkosinathi, Sifiso, Siyabonga and Thabani. The original group had consisted of six boys, some of whom had been friends from primary school. In the course of 2009 the one member was murdered; I was told that his brother had been a criminal and that he had been mistaken for him and killed. Another left the area to study elsewhere and thus could not take part in the study.

The group had initially got together in early 2009 while in Grade 11 to talk about their situation and to plan how to respond. At this time, for example, in the annual national assessment, Sifiso had achieved the highest marks in class for Mathematics – 12%. It took time for them to develop their strategies, and their final marks in 2009 were still not good.

The themes below describe the specific elements of the strategies that they pursued. However, the remarkable success of these strategies is readily evident from the matriculation results they achieved:

	Nkosinathi	Sifiso	Siyabonga	Thabani
English	78	78	59	65
isiZulu	76	77	72	79
Mathematics	87	100	89	100
Ad Maths		87		80
Physical Sciences	83	98	85	96
Life Sciences	93	92		
Geography	92	90	92	
Engineering Graphics and Design			70	75
Computer Applications Technology			50	70
Life Orientation	77	91	75	77

As an indication of the significance of these scores, it is worth noting that in the nationwide matriculation examinations in 2010, only 44.7% of students wrote Mathematics. Of these, the proportion of students who achieved a mark of 30% or more was only 47.4% - the modal mark was thus below 30%. For Physical Sciences, the corresponding figures were 34.9% and 47.8% (Department of Education, 2011).

The pass rates at Patonville High School in the matriculation examination over this period were as follows (Department of Basic Education, 2013):

Year	Those writing the exam	Those who passed	Pass rate
2009			40 (est.)*
2010	146	99	67.8
2011	130	84	64.6
2012	186	88	47.3

\* personal communication, current principal

Although it has not been possible to establish the pass rate in 2009, both the current principal (who had been a teacher at the time) and a member of the 2009 class agree that it was in the range of upper 30s to low 40s. It is noticeable then that there was a spike in the pass rate in 2010; possibly the success of this group both brought greater hope to other students and also increased teachers' sense of possibility as to what could be achieved. According to the current principal (who had been a teacher in 2009), there was an impetus from that before the school went again into a decline.

## 6. The themes

The analysis led to the identification of four themes drawn primarily from the data provided by the four participants in the group, while reference is made also to the other sources of data that corroborate, qualify or challenge the perspective provided by the group members.

### Education and society have failed us

In the interviews the participants constantly referred to the idea of failure – why their peers failed, how the teachers failed, how the school failed them. An initial question to the group as to why they had chosen to go to Patonville High School was met with raucous laughter. The poverty of their families meant that travelling to better schools, even in the next township, was not possible. They had to deal with a school whose failings were evident. As Nkosinathi, who lived next door to the school, said:

*There is always smoking in corridors, learners dodging, bunking, there was bunking, gambling, corruption if I may say, I knew, because I was witnessing it every day, I knew what to experience when I was going there. The pass mark was not even in my mind; I knew that no-one in PHS could get an A.*

The group's negative expectations were borne out in reality. They complained that teachers would not come to class, or a teacher would come and get a girl to do her hair in class. Sizwe mentioned the one case: "Ms X went out of the class and it was towards the June examinations, she didn't teach us until she came back in September after we had been begging her to come back to class."

Part of the problem with the school was that there had been constant conflict between student leadership and the school management. The student leadership stated that the principal was generally absent and alleged that he had also assaulted learners. In addition, the continued presence of corporal punishment had been a divisive factor, with students focusing on how to avoid this instead of how to study. However, the leaders who had focused on

opposing him had changed their tactics and advised learners not to challenge him constantly. According to Sizwe:

*We instilled a culture of fighting against the teachers to get what we need, basically what we wanted. So basically in Grade 11 most of the learners failed. Afterwards when I was in Grade 12 I was elected deputy class rep. ...I saw that it would not help if we kept pushing on the same way, we needed to change.*

When I kept asking if they had had one good teacher in their final year, they were insistent that they had not. In their view, most teachers communicated a pervasive negativity about the intellectual potential of township learners and the prospects for their success. However, they were being encouraged by two or three of the teachers at the school who did not teach them, in particular those who came from townships, as opposed to those who had moved to the suburbs and had their children in formerly White schools. The two former teachers interviewed (one of whom had not taken the group) saw it differently. Both attributed the group's success primarily to the support they and other teachers had provided – which would not explain why success had not been sustained after the group had left, suggesting that the teachers' support was a response to the agency of the group. However, the group members were also keen to accentuate the obstacles they faced.

The students discussed how the school had failed them in other ways. They alleged that they were buying the wrong books, and Nkosinathi's parent bought him a Geography book that the teacher then borrowed. In comparison, learners from Patonville who went to other schools had "the sources, the best books, study guides, everything". Two students studied Computer Applications Technology, but the resources were inadequate:

*Our teachers were not concerned about us, and the lack of resources. We needed computers for CAT, we were sharing computers. (Siyabonga)*

*There were no Saturday classes for computers. (Thabani)*

They were also up against the scholars' own pervasive negativity about the significance of education and the sense of having very few options in society. From the outset, though, they had insisted on seeing beyond the dismal prospects in a society with extremely high levels of youth unemployment.

*...what is running in most of us is I must go and work, if you have grade 12, you have got everything, you end up working in factories as a general labourer, using your physical powers, not your mental powers... People settle at a lower level, they don't know what they want to do. (Nkosinathi)*

*We were exposed to those things at grade 10, we would go to exhibition centres, these others would go to the taxi industry. (Sifiso)*

The murder of their group member was a further reminder of the negative expectations for them, one that spurred them to invest in education as a way out: "We say that there was no life in Patonville. It keeps us going" (Sifiso).

In the second half of their final year, 2010, there was a bitter and prolonged national strike by teachers which further demonstrated the failings of the education system. The negative effect of this on these students, however, was very limited, as by then they were operating with very little support from teachers.

Finally, the failure of their peers was a troubling issue. A persistent topic was the fate of those who were with them, but who fell behind. They would refer to people I know, who had been in their class and were now hanging around the streets, some engaging in petty crime, some working at a car wash, and mostly addicted to the drug known locally as “whoonga”. A major element, in their view, was the difficulties of studying in a second language. Not only was failure to understand English a problem, the experience of struggling to speak in English in class was also humiliating.

*If I can't speak freely in the class in front of so many people, that would be a problem for you, it was so hard for you to get proper marks in class. (Siyabonga)*

*Most people fail that part in Maths where it comes to the financial Maths, the section, the interpretation of language, because they cannot understand the English, they fail. (Sifiso)*

While Nkosinathi stated that “it is painful for me when they stay behind”, Siyabonga’s view was rather that he was happy to separate himself from them: “Not when you are studying hard, and they are chilling. I cannot feel sorry for them.” The four central participants in this study thus emphasised their vulnerability and that of those around them, while simultaneously celebrating their agency in the face of what seemed at times overwhelming obstacles. This emphasise on the harshness of their situation is consistent with a basic point about resilience made by Ungar (2018), that it takes places in contexts of adversity.

### **Responding to failure, we develop strategies and we appropriate resources**

The second theme explores the ways in which the group confronted the structural obstacles of society and education. They took pride in their own response to failure. In fact, the recognition of failure was itself a point to celebrate:

*I remember the day, it was the end of the year, it was dark, at the circle, we said, next year, I am going to show them who we are. We were motivated from the results in Grade 11. We got to see that we were not doing what we could be. Nkosinathi*

As Sizwe said, “The difference is how you respond to your failure.” This is a continuing theme – in speaking recently about their careers and the possibility of going into business, Sifiso said, “We are quite likely to fail, but we are not scared of that.”

The decision the group took in late 2009 was to marshal their own resources and to cease waiting for the school to carry out its obligations. Their basic strategy was to combine individual study with an intense group process and the relentless pursuit of resources that would aid them.

The teachers had promoted the ideas of study groups and some learners had contested this. In the view of the group, the teachers did not fully understand the nature of study groups; they were a supplement to individual study, not an alternative. Individual study meant reading, reading again and exploring meaning.

*For physical sciences, also, reading, just understand I would really read for ten times, then read it again, relate to the problems. Using the material, analysing the material, ja. When you analyse it you get to think about it and then relate it to something else, that helps me. (Sifiso)*

This emphasis on individual study suggests that the strategies drew as much on the culture of schooling as the culture of the township. The participants did not use the term

“study” for their group process, which they described as similar to what I was witnessing in the focus group discussions. From the outset, meeting with the group meant taking on their style of adjusting to their boisterous swagger, with much laughter and self-praise. This style, loud and confident, matched their description of their boisterous interchanges while arguing in their study group. It compares with what Zimbabwean learners call “groupworks”, the “self-motivated process of informally building and pooling resources” (Madzima, 2014: 203).

At one point the comment was made that someone watching them would think they were just playing around, but the purpose was in fact entirely serious. This was a way of engaging intellectually with problems, and arguing out the solution. I recalled that I was familiar with this pattern of interaction, not from my own history in a private boys’ school, but from being present at times when young people from the township would engage in exuberant and lengthy debate. The group had appropriated this cultural style to serve the needs of intellectual enquiry. At some point learners in this group collaborated with the girls’ group at the other high school. Two points arise from this – the emphasis on group process, of being in this together, a reflection of *ubuntu*, and the fact that their reliance on a single-gender group did not exclude co-operation across gender.

The sense of confident appropriation, of turning whatever was available to serve their purpose, pervaded the discussion. Nkosinathi said: “Students in Black society do not have a study focus. I organised a small table, I stole it from school. I placed it in the bedroom.”

The group constantly identified and pursued opportunities. They found out what assistance NGOs were offering, in the way of Saturday classes and made full use of them. During the teachers’ strike, the Education Department set up study centres and they made use of these, and found that the teaching was in fact better than they were getting at school. They also needed to overcome the limitations of the materials available to them. With no access at school to the Internet, they would put their limited funds together so that one of the group could go to an Internet café to download study materials.

As their confidence grew, they realised that they could make some small income from tutoring learners in the “multiracial” schools and in the process get more adequate materials.

*They would come to us and say, help us. (Sifiso)*

*If they understood it, they did not understand it in a deeper sense, they would come with a lot of information that we did not even have, and we would use it, they could get all the information, all the sources, the best books, study guides, everything... (Nkosinathi)*

An unintended consequence of their success was that teachers began to recognise their growing capacity for success; the Maths teacher then asked them to work with his other grades. The experience of teaching served to strengthen their knowledge as it compelled them to review what they knew. However, they were critical of what they found:

*That teacher would make us feel embarrassed that we were not so good [in comparison to the younger learners]. When we were in grade 11 the teacher asked us to teach them, and we saw that they did not know anything. I had been feeling bad that there was someone in grade 10 who was good, but these children were all spoon-fed by their teacher, everything was just given to them. (Nkosinathi).*

In summary, the participants employed a pragmatic range of strategies: independent study – reading and solving problems, group debates and contestation, access to better

quality materials through the Internet, extra classes on offer. Ungar (2018) refers resilience as not so much a trait as a process: “a human system [is] resilient if that system is engaged in a continuous process of acquiring and sustaining the resources required to function well under stress.” The systematic ways of working developed by the participants constituted such a process.

This pragmatic, innovative approach Grint (2008) describes as *bricolage*, cobbling together whatever is at hand to deal with a problem for which there is no elegant solution. Put differently, South African education is a wicked problem that calls for imperfect but workable ways ahead.

The participants’ success was not a result of the educational capital of their parents. The group members’ parents were educated only to a low level and they did not always understand what their sons needed at school. However, they were committed to their sons’ education and would attend parents’ meetings. This commitment to education was a key resource that the group could draw upon, even if it meant that at times that the interests of other family members were subordinated to their needs to study – such as not letting them watch soap operas because they needed quiet to study.

### **“Learning is within our blood”**

The respondents distinguished sharply between “cramming” and what they themselves would refer to as “deep” understanding. Even those teachers who were committed to teaching would communicate the need to keep solving problems without pushing to understand theory. Their enemy was “spotting” (anticipating exam questions and rehearsing how to pass them) and the pressure to get the matric pass rate up by training for the examination. Thabani insisted that “we did not spot for our exams.”

*The basic interest is to teach learners how to get deep knowledge. Most teachers teach us how to attempt questions, they don't care if you understand or not. (Siyabonga)*

*The fact that we were discovering tricky things in mathematics... I could solve any problem because I was not cramming. There were children who got As but who could not do a simple problem. (Nkosinathi)*

Similarly, Sifiso referred to a key driver as the “love of the subject”. He gave an example of how, in his first year at university, he shared a room with someone who had achieved similar results to his. However, that success had come from a school where they were “crammed”, and the student finally dropped out. Van den Berg et al. (2011) refer to the pressure on the system for improved results, which creates perverse incentives that prioritise passing over learning.

This is a significant area as it touches on an ongoing debate about the role of the cultural capital of students from areas of disadvantage (Moore & Muller, 1999). According to Fataar (2012), “A key conceptual challenge remains, as expressed in the work of Bernstein around the commensurability of horizontal (life world) knowledge and vertical school knowledge.” In this case, while the students developed strategies that drew eclectically on school knowledge and life world knowledge, these strategies were highly effective at enabling their access into the vertical knowledge systems of education. This raises questions as to ways in which teachers may draw students’ attention to their own capacity for developing strategies for learning.

## Our success

The strategies of the group continued past the matriculation examination and enabled them to transition into university study with ease. In a context where the proportion of first year entrants who complete their degrees after four years is only 37%, (Africa Check, 2016), these students excelled. Three students moved to the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where Thabani and Siyabonga studied Electrical Engineering and Nkosinathi Agricultural Engineering. Sifiso took Chemical Engineering at the University of the Witwatersrand. By the end of 2014, Sifiso and Thabani had completed successfully, while Nkosinathi transferred to Land Surveying. Only Siyabonga did not complete all his modules, due largely to money problems. Sifiso completed his Masters with excellent results.

In 2017 Sifiso left his work to set up a tutorial academy that would teach youngsters in schools what they had learnt, in collaboration with Thabani. However, this was a frustrating experience; when I met him at Patonville High to see the work with students there, no students had yet come an hour after the appointed time, even though they were donating their time. Their vision of enabling township students to break through the constraints of the system was thwarted both by the lack of resources they would have needed to make decisive impact and by the lack of commitment of young people who could not recognise the significance of what they were offering.

By the end of 2018, the participants were aged roughly 25 years. Thabani was an electrical engineer with the municipality and Sifiso a project manager for a large industrial firm. Both complained that professional life insufficiently drew on their intellectual capacities. Sifiso had, for example, developed a solution for a major technical problem in the firm, which was ignored because the management had brought in an expert from the UK. Nkosinathi had worked as an intern for a State department but experienced difficulties that led to his leaving; he is now actively a political organiser in Patonville. Siyabonga was self-employed as an electrical engineer; in early 2019 he reported that he may have secured funding to develop an innovative design that would overcome the problem of intermittent power supply from renewable systems.

## 7. Discussion

This is an account that demonstrates the potential for resilience in an education system that has continued to fail South African society. In response to the adverse circumstances that confronted them and that impeded the possibility of fruitful and rewarding lives for themselves and their families, this group developed strategies that evolved into an ongoing resilient system (Ungar, 2018). This enabled effective responses within the school environment and had lasting effects that sustained them through their university careers and beyond.

It is though by no means inevitable that their strategies will result in success in all cases. One example was the attempt by Sifiso and Thabani to develop a tutoring business based on their success. Nothing ensures that others, be they potential funders or township youth, would grasp the value of such an initiative. Similarly, employment has so far not matched their expectations for themselves. Resilience alone does not ensure that society will shift. However, the group has an enduring sense that failure is simply one stage in a process towards success.

The first research question asked what pedagogical strategies enabled success; it is clear that this group drew on a range of resources and strategies that ranged from conventional studying to a collective approach that drew on the cultural style of youngsters in their context.

The one factor that seems critical in enabling them to envisage this seems to have been the positive value their families placed on education; this had translated into a strong sense of their own agency.

The four students saw their own agency and innovation as central, and certainly it must be decisive, in that it was not equalled after they left. Smaller elements could have been the support provided by responsive teachers and the shift in the role of student leadership in trying to find nonviolent ways of resolving conflicts in the school. However, students leave, and their agency cannot transform a school over longer periods of time. That requires the commitment of education officials working with principals and teachers who choose to work with the resources that students bring.

The study draws attention to the resources that students and their communities bring to education (Fataar, 2012, 2016; Yosso, 2005). This is not an argument for forming an educational curriculum based on the incursion into schooling of unstructured local knowledge. The same participants whose agency reminds us that there are resources beyond the school also remind us of their love of theory and of knowledge that must be engaged with in depth. Le Grange (2016) refers to *reciprocal appropriation* in the relationship between communities and education. Similarly, Chisholm (2017) brings into the view the ways in which rural communities in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century were not simply passive recipients of a Eurocentric education but sought to promote the system that would best promote what they saw as their interests.

The second research question addressed the potential for the participants to achieve systemic change. In one sense, because they do not spell out the broader implications, it may seem that their approach did not go as far as resistance to the system. However, I would identify these continuing features as evidence that their approach is potentially transformative:

- A consistent belief in the intellectual ability not only of themselves but of their peers.
- A rejection of approaches that aim simply to get by, thus setting high standards for achievement.
- A readiness to explore, innovate and maybe fail, without giving up.
- An understanding of ways of using collective action to advance learning.

Were such principles to drive the actions of officials, principals and educators in the South African educational system, the transformative potential of this thinking would become evident.

## 8. Conclusion

From 1976 young South Africans forced change in the educational system, often at the cost of much human suffering. This article argues for a recognition of the value of the contributions that young South Africans can make now to education and society. Most research on schooling focuses little on the commitment and intellectual capacity of young people; this study aims in part to challenge that omission. Young African people have the capacity to infuse education with their agency and innovation; they need that to be recognised by educators.

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