

**Perceived Influences on Collegiate Success in the Context of Social Adversity**



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in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences  
at Stellenbosch University

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## **DECLARATION**

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## ABSTRACT

Non-traditional students or students entering tertiary education at an older age represent a growing portion of South African students in higher education. These are students who for any number of reasons have disengaged with the typical educational path. The future of post-apartheid South Africa is deeply dependent on expanding access to the economy, and securing this access is largely dependent on opening the doors of learning and education to this marginalized group. As such, supporting academic re-engagement for non-traditional students is essential to the growth of South Africa.

In order to better understand how to support non-traditional students, this study sought to identify the challenges facing South African students, and to understand the elements that foster resilience in them, specifically as it relates to their academic pursuits. A case study of non-traditional students pursuing higher education was undertaken based on qualitative inquiry that focused on student experiences preceding and during collegiate study at the Tertiary School for Business Administration (TSiBA), a community college catering for students from low-income backgrounds. During semi-structured interviews, students detailed the elements of their experiences that they perceived as impacting their respective academic careers. These elements were determined to be supports or challenges, based on existing literature focused on youth development, education, and resilience. Data was collected from 10 TSiBA students, all having completed at least one year of study at the institution.

This study found that, while there was clear evidence of deep levels of adversity and trauma in their lives, students mostly benefitted from supports and programming aimed at providing financial relief, promoting mental and emotional health, and fostering a sense of

community and shared responsibility among students. With these elements being core functions of the TSIBA model, the institution's comparatively high student throughput (success) rate indicates that the provision of such supports is effective in mitigating adverse conditions and allowing students that might have been thwarted by such adversity to maintain their educational pursuits.

The essential finding of this study is that students can thrive when adequately resourced and provided with the right supports. Financial backing and people-based supports- such as counselling and development services and mentorship- may yield profound positive impacts on a student's ability to reach academic achievement and may even be the difference between educational pursuit and unreachd potential.

## OPSOMMING

Nie-tradisionele studente of students wie tersiêre opvoeding teen 'n latere ouderdom begin, verteenwoordig toenemend 'n groter persentasie van Suid-Afrikaanse studente aan 'n hoër opvoedingsinstelling. Daar is 'n verskeidenheid van redes waarom hulle nie die tipiese pad van naskoolse opvoeding gevolg het nie. Die toekoms van post-apartheid Suid-Afrika is baie afhanklik van die groter toegang tot die ekonomie, en om hierdie toegang te verseker is grootliks afhanklik om die deure van leer en opvoeding oop te maak vir hierdie gemarginaliseerde groep. Om dié rede is die ondersteuning tot akademiese her-toegang vir nie-tradisionale studente essensieel tot die groei van Suid-Afrika.

Ten einde 'n beter verstaan te genereer hoe om nie-tradisionele studente te ondersteun, het hierdie studie gepoog om die uitdagings te identifiseer van Suid-Afrikaanse studente, en om daardie elemente te verstaan wat hul veerkragtigheid uitbou, veral met betrekking tot hul akademiese strewes. 'n Gevalle-studie is onderneem met nie-tradisionele students aan 'n hoër opvoedingsinstelling gebaseer op 'n kwalitatiewe ondersoek wat gefokus het op studente se ervarings voor en tydens kollegiale studie aan die Tersiere Skool vir Besigheidsadministrasie ("Tertiary School for Business Administration", TSiBA), 'n gemeenskapskollege vir studente van 'n lae-inkomste agtergrond. Tydens die semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude het studente die elemente van hul ervarings beskryf wat volgens hul persepsies hul akademiese loopbane beïnvloed het. Dit is vasgestel dat daardie elemente ondersteuningsbronne of uitdagings verteenwoordig gebaseer op bestaande literatuur oor jeug-ontwikkeling, opvoeding, en veerkragtigheid. Data is ingesamel van 10 TSiBA-studente wie almal ten minste een jaar studie aan die instelling voltooi het.

Gebaseer op die bevindings van hierdie studie is gevind dat ten spyte van bewyse van hoë vlakke van teenspoed, studente meeste gebaat het by ondersteuning en programme gerig op finansiële hulpverlening, die bevordering van geestes-en emosionele gesondheid, en die uitbou van 'n sin van gemeenskap and gedeelde verantwoordelikheid onder die studente. Terwyl hierdie elemente ook die kernfunksies van die TSiBA model verteenwoordig, toon die TSiBA se relatiewe hoë studente sukseskoers dat die voorsiening van sulke ondersteuning effektief is in die tempering van moeilike omstandighede, en die bied van geleenthede vir studente wat andersins deur sulke teenspoed gedwarsboom sou wees om hul opvoedkundige ideale te verwerklik.

Die mees belangrike bevinding van hierdie studie is dat studente kan floreer wanneer hulle oor voldoende hulpbronne beskik. Finansiële hulpverlening en mens-gebaseerde ondersteuning - soos berading en ontwikkelingsdienste en mentorskap – kan hierdie kragtige positiewe impak bied vir 'n student se vermoë om akademiese prestasie te behaal, en kan selfs die verskil wees tussen die verwerkliking van opvoedkundige strewes en potensiaal.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Preface

This study is motivated largely by the recognition that for many students in South Africa, the traditional educational course of matriculating and ascending to higher education proves unattainable (DBE, 2015). As South Africa seeks to move beyond the cumulative and destructive legacies of European colonialism and apartheid rule, Black South Africans in particular- often targeted for the most draconian of colonial and apartheid policies (Naidoo, Pretorius, & Nicholas, 2017) - continue to struggle to gain access to the modern South African higher educational system and economy.

Sixty percent of South African students that enroll in the first grade will not graduate from high school (DBE, 2015). For the 12% who do matriculate and are able to pursue further educational goals, the rates of attrition are also of major concern. A 2008 report to the Human Sciences Resource Council found that only 22% of students enrolled in undergraduate study would complete their coursework in the standard three-year time period allotted bachelor or undergraduate study, while 50% would drop out from study altogether. The report also found that some universities reached attrition rates over 80% (Letseka & Maile, 2008).

Understanding the factors contributing to these daunting levels of attrition is essential to ensuring that students (and their institutions) can recognise and engage with their respective agency and capacity for achievement. These impediments are



often embedded in the household and the local community. Without the appropriate resources and supports in place, these risk factors may prove insurmountable for some (Moodley & Singh, 2015). Many South African students emerge from homes and communities that struggle to meet their material and developmental needs (Dube-Addae, 2019). Any number or confluence of conditions may serve to hinder the learner and limit achievement (Nduna & Jewkes 2012). Research has identified household poverty and cost of education (i.e., access costs and transport), teenage pregnancy, a lack of interest in schooling, and having failed a grade or being behind in schoolwork as the main precursors for attrition (Weybright, Caldwell, Xie, Wegner, & Smith, 2017). One consistent finding is that dropping out of school results in poorer psychological, physical, social, and economic health for the school dropout (Lamb & Markussen, 2011). A better understanding of the experiences and circumstances that influence and impact educational pursuits could contribute help to increase both retention and throughput rates.

In seeking to identify these factors, there is much to be gleaned from the perspectives of those students for whom these challenges- while certainly disruptive and distressing- are not prohibitive to the pursuit of academic goals. These are students that manage to meet the demands of higher education while withstanding obstacles that often hinder their peers (DBE, 2015). This study recognises that these students can offer unique and valuable perspectives of resilience, particularly as it relates to academic pursuit and achievement in the face of adversity. Such perspectives may offer greater insight into the functional phenomena (Dube-Addae,

2019) that contribute beneficially to student achievement, in the context of social adversity.

## **1.2 Background**

The youth of South Africa are faced with manifold challenges. They are among the most vulnerable members of a nation seeking to flourish in the global economy, while struggling to address significant and perpetual economic disparity and widespread disadvantage. The NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) statistic for South Africans aged 15- 24 years is 32.4% - nearly 1 in 3- while the overall unemployment rate for South Africa is holding at nearly 27% (SSA, 2018). These statistics demonstrate a significant challenge that demands redress, if a strong, thriving South Africa is to emerge.

### **1.2.1 A struggling educational system**

Perhaps the greatest hindrances to the respective employability of the South African youth are rooted in education. Of particular note and concern is the rate of educational disengagement among South African students. A report released in early 2014 found that nearly half of the students projected to matriculate (grade 12 students in 2012) were no longer enrolled by grade 11. More than twenty percent of those scheduled to matriculate in 2012 were lost during grade 10 alone (Rademeyer, 2014).

Students that are fortunate enough complete primary and secondary education may still experience significant delay and attrition at the collegiate level. Nearly 50% of South African students that register to attend South African universities do not

complete their course of study, with the number of Black students ending study in their first year at more than 30% (Van Der Merwe, 2017). Further, students working at a pace slower than the prescribed three-year course have pushed the university population beyond the capacity of South Africa's higher educational system. This system- with its current capacity to provide college education for 600,000 students at any given time- is now working to meet the needs of nearly 1 million students. Under these conditions, university resources have become strained, driving cost increases, and thus further limiting access to higher education for South African students (Van Der Merwe, 2017).

As the higher education system in South Africa increases in cost as capacity dwindles, new students will continue to endure impediments to access, independent of the challenges nested in their more local environs.

### **1.2.2 Local obstacles for the learner**

Young people who disengage from educational pursuit may do so for a variety of reasons in their everyday experience. Some are drawn into negative adaptive behaviour as the result of seemingly insurmountable obstacles in their respective experiences. Others may be deterred by financial hardship, sickness or death of loved ones, home abuse, denied pregnancy, or any overwhelming confluence of circumstance (Nduna & Jewkes, 2012). In the context of South Africa, exosystemic risk factors such as high unemployment, community poverty, violence, gangsterism, high rates of substance abuse may correlate to academic unpreparedness, truancy, and eventually dropout.

Some young people withstand challenges and overcome impediments to their ambitions, achieving their respective academic goals in a traditional course; others may not. When young people diverge from or struggle with the prescriptive educational path, windows of opportunity may close for them. With resources strained, social investment tends to be directed toward students exhibiting strong academic ability and performance (Fleisch, 2016). This reverse triage approach- focusing resources on those students that require the least attention- may greatly hinder the educational outcomes South African students, failing to provide the skills or knowledge that may be needed to promote economic participation and social mobility. A growing devaluation of education in strained areas may also contribute to conditions deleterious to the educational process. With families- and even students- recognising that local economic conditions are more favourable to labourers than professionals, engagement with educational opportunities may be viewed as wasteful or pointless (Jansen, 2012).

### **1.3 Moving forward: an example to model**

Conditions of limited access and wide-scale disadvantage are not congruent with any vision of an equitable and thriving South Africa. It is a contention of this study that South Africa- in order to increase its economic power and general prosperity- should engage a dual focus: improving primary and secondary education outcomes for future students. Moreover, re-engaging those students whose educational careers have been hindered, disrupted, or delayed is essential, and the focus of this research study. The educational model offered by the Tertiary School in Business

Administration (TSiBA) provides just such a point of engagement and reengagement for students affected by conditions of adversity.

The TSiBA Education system is a Further Education and Training Institute (FET) that follows a community college structure. TSiBA has two campuses, in Cape Town and Eden, respectively. The TSiBA student body is comprised predominantly of Black<sup>1</sup> and Coloured<sup>1</sup> students. The majority of the TSiBA student body is aged between 19-24 years, coming from low-resourced, low-income communities such as Langa, Khayalitsha, and Gugulethu (TSiBA Annual Report 2017, n.d.). With the Cape Town campus offering a degree programme, some students have relocated from various regions of the country to pursue their studies at the institution. TSiBA also enrolls eligible foreign students.

To enroll at TSiBA, perspective students must attain the National Qualifications Framework Level 4 qualification, equivalent to matric level. Assuming satisfaction of this entry requirement, students enter course study for the Higher Certificate in Business Administration (HCBA). Upon completion of the HCBA programme, they are then eligible to pursue the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) degree.

In striving to address the financial challenges facing many members of student body, TSiBA offers fulltime scholarships (McFarlane, 2016), and this support has contributed to impressive outcomes. In 2017, the college reported that 92% of TSiBA

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<sup>1</sup> Racial descriptors such as “White”, “Black”, and “Coloured”- as used in this thesis- refer to the designations which characterised apartheid policies and practices of the past. I am opposed to racial classifications, and the divisions and suffering they create.

degree graduates were working, engaged in their own entrepreneurial endeavours, or pursuing post-graduate studies full-time (TSiBA Annual Report 2017, n.d.).

TSiBA students and graduates also feature among South Africa's strongest academic achievers. Many have completed international internships, and while TSiBA's student body is not large, a number of competitive scholars have emerged from its doors, including 7 graduates who have received Mandela Rhodes Scholarships (McFarlane, 2016).

Given these encouraging outcomes, and the struggles of the home communities represented in the student body, the TSiBA Cape Town campus was deemed to be an ideal research site for this study.

#### **1.4 Goals of this study**

This study sought to identify and examine the unique and shared experiences and circumstances that non-traditional students coming from conditions of social adversity perceived as pivotal to their educational careers. Exploration of the perceptions of non-traditional students who have achieved academic success in the context of personal and social adversity may offer insight on how to effectively reengage and support non-traditional students toward achieving academic and personal goals.

This study seeks to contribute to that body of research, and to illuminate positive supports for coping and resilience, throughout the student experience.

This research was conceived and conducted under certain precepts and theories tied to wellness and achievement in the academic setting. The first precept is that educational access is critical to a thriving and equitable society (Byrd, 2012). The next precept is that the educational environ is most effective when it adopts a holistic understanding of the needs and challenges facing students and how to mitigate those factors (Prilleltensky, 2014). The third precept is that the school community has the potential to support and enrich the whole of the educational experience for the individual student (Henderson, 2013). These precepts are rooted in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which treats the interaction of the individual and the environments in which she/he functions as pivotal to development (Bronfenbrenner, 1989).

## 1.5 Definition of key constructs

In this section, the key constructs essential to this study are presented and defined:

**Ecological systems theory** – Bronfenbrenner's (1989) explanation of human development and experience as seen through five distinct yet interlinked layers of the experiential world

**Holistic education** – an approach that seeks not only to address the academic needs of a student, but also recognises that personal health and security is an essential component to educational achievement (Kirk, 2002)

**Motivation** – the rationale or reasoning for behaviour (McFarlane, 2016)

**Non-traditional students** – students coming from socioeconomic backgrounds that differ from those of students typical in higher education, and managing unique concerns that impact them personally and academically (Chung, Turnbull & Chur-Hansen, 2014)

**Resilience** – the ability to withstand the impact of instances or conditions not conducive to function or development (Wright & Masten, 2015)

**Social Adversity** – “a broad range of social contextual stressors, ranging from poverty and deprivation to acute and chronic life stress, to the experiences of societal stratification, subordination, and social network affiliation” (Boyce, Sokolowski, & Robinson, 2012, p. 17143)

**Social and emotional learning** – learning focused on an individual’s ability to manage her/his own emotions and interactions in ways that benefit herself/himself and others (Jones & Doolittle, 2017)

**Wellness** – a state of equilibrium between the challenges facing an individual and the resources available to address those needs (McFarlane, 2016)

**Youth** – individuals between 15 and 34 years of age, based on the South African government’s age delineation for employment statistics (SSA, 2018)

## 1.6 Chapter outline

The remaining chapters of this study are presented as follows:



Chapter 2 explores the thinking and beliefs that motivated this study and establishes the epistemology of this study by examining those elements in the context of related theory. The chapter begins with an explanation of the researcher's views as related to educational provision, then provides the theoretical framework supporting and motivating those views.

Chapter 3 examines an array of perspectives, thought, and research related to the objective and various constructs of this study. This literature covers the historical and modern social and economic conditions in South Africa, challenges and supports embedded in various ecological systems, the impacts of poverty and emotional trauma, cognitive development, and discussions of varying perspectives of the concept of resilience. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the TSIBA model and outcomes in the context of South African higher education. Also in this chapter, the theoretical framework for this study will be detailed, establishing the foundations of thought from which this study emerged.

Chapter 4 examines the methodology utilised in the gathering and analysis of research data. This includes the research site and sample population, the questions employed in the research interviews, and a review of the data analysis procedure employed to organise and extrapolate meaning from the data collected. Ethical considerations are also presented. Finally, this chapter conclude with a discussion of my own reflexivity as researcher in the context of the study.

In Chapter 5, summaries of each participant interview are presented, to allow for greater familiarity with the participants' respective narratives. The findings from

the analysis of the collected data are then presented, based upon the themes that were identified in the data analysis process and discussed in relation to elements of participant interviews.

In Chapter 6, the findings are discussed, and recommendations based on said findings are presented. Next, the limitations of the study are discussed. Finally, the writing concludes with a personal reflexivity, addressing the impact of this study on the researcher.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, the viewpoints and belief structure from which this study emerged will be examined. The theoretical foundations for these elements will be presented to establish the epistemology of this study. Specific attention will be given to theory focused on concepts of human behaviour, development, wellness, and motivation.

This chapter first presents an examination of literature focused on human behavior and theories pertaining to human behaviour, personal development, motivation, and wellness.

#### **2.2 Precepts for research**

Fundamental to this study is the understanding that human experience varies vastly. Within the individual's experience are a myriad of attributes. Gender, ability, personal identities- such as race or ethnicity, religious, national, and sexual-, socioeconomic status, preferences, aspirations, and many more elements constitute the individual's understanding and experience of the world around them. Attempting to quantify such forces would be speculative, at best. Therefore, there were no presumptions of values for respective experiences. Instead, this study recognises the value and potential of the educational setting as a mitigating factor to academic and

personal obstacles. In accordance, this study is guided by three overarching premises.

### **2.2.1 Education as a path to individual and societal growth**

The first concept is that a strong educational foundation creates opportunity, for the individual and the society. A UNICEF 2015 report entitled, “The Investment Case for Education and Equity” explores the benefits of educational investment. Based on 800+ surveys conducted in 139 countries, it was estimated that for each year of higher education, an adult would see an average of 10% increase in earnings. The financial impact of education was found to be most noticeable in lower- and middle-income countries. In addition to this benefit, Montenegro and Patrinos (2014) reported that women are most-impacted by this trend, enjoying the greatest increase in earnings based on the attainment of higher education (UNICEF, 2015).

Byrd (2012) posits that economic growth is the product of physical capital (i.e. natural resources), financial capital (i.e., funding for investment), and human capital, or the “the knowledge, skills, and capacity of a nation’s populace” (p. 103). For Byrd, this capital system is predicated first upon human capital, as the human capital allows for the successful utilisation of physical and financial capital. As such, there must be sufficient and effectively-targeted resources allocated to educating the populace, for the development of human capital. Byrd cites the economic and social improvements of Singapore and as being demonstrative of the positive societal impact of significant educational investment. “Less than fifty years after Singapore’s independence, the country transformed its population from uneducated and unskilled, with very little

English, into highly educated, highly skilled workers, with English language capability” (Byrd, 2012, p. 105).

### **2.2.2 The accommodating campus**

The second concept from which this study emerges is that the educational environment must be aware of- and accommodating to- the various needs and challenges inherent and respective to each student.

A study of tuition-free alternative schools and flexible learning centres found that marginalised students were notably better able to perform academically when introduced to school environments that aimed to address and accommodate their unique needs (McGregor & Mills, 2012). The provision of services and resources- such as social workers and crèches- helped to alleviate factors that are often distractions from- or prohibitive to- student reengagement (McGregor & Mills, 2012).

Kirk (2002), presenting *A “Holistic” Approach to Support for Learning*, advocates for expanding access to higher education, and using retention rates as a primary determinant of systemic success. Concurrently, she acknowledges the concern of addressing increasingly diverse student support needs. She emphasises the need for and importance of tutorial support for students. In addition, Kirk deems student counseling resources as a vital investment for student retention and success. In Kirk’s view, student-to-student engagement lends itself to positive academic outcomes. In this “Holistic Approach”, these various resources are managed through a communicative and engaged faculty, who monitor student progress and intervene

when students are first recognised to be struggling with either coursework, or more daunting personal challenges (Kirk, 2002).

*The Economic Value of Social and Social and emotional learning* (Belfield et al., 2015) presents an in-depth analysis of the costs and benefits of investment in social and social and emotional learning in the educational environment, from an economic standpoint. The study sought to quantify the value of school-based social and emotional learning interventions. These valuations were placed in the broader context of economics. Each of the six programmes evaluated in the study was found to yield a substantial potential reduction in societal spending, based on reduction in delinquent behavior, substance abuse, criminal probability, and perpetual unemployment/unemployability, and an increase in student resilience and retention, and consequently, labour market gains (Belfield et al., 2015).

In addition to conducive social and emotional environmental milieu, the accessibility of extracurricular activities is also of great importance for academic, social, and emotional learning. Massoni discusses the inherent value of extracurricular activities, which she defines as “activities that students participate in that do not fall into the realm of normal curriculum of schools” (2011, p. 84). Massoni conveys the benefits of such activities within the school community, including higher self-esteem and more positive attitudes toward school, reductions in risk behaviours, and the development of positive life skills. Such activities, while not a required part of the curriculum, allow the participant to grow and improve a variety of skills, from leadership and communication to teamwork and creativity (Massoni, 2011).

It has also been identified that nutritional support programmes and adequate food access have an impact on academic outcomes (Woodhouse & Lamport, 2012). With challenges to nutritional access being so prevalent in developing nations, addressing this need not only serves to ensure the general welfare, but also to benefit the ability of the individual to perform academically and professionally (Martinez, Frongillo, Leung, & Ritchie, 2018).

### **2.2.3 The value of the school community**

The third precept for this research is that the educational setting should be grounded in a community of engagement and care between students, instructors, and general faculty and staff (Tronto, 2010). Kirk's *"Holistic" Approach* (2002) demands a collective faculty approach to education, with strong communication between faculty members. This exchange establishes a virtual safety net for students, with instructors and staff being able to identify and respond to indicators that students may be struggling academically or personally.

A study of data from a survey of over 58,000 university students found that the students that engaged most regularly with faculty members enjoyed the highest levels of satisfaction in their educational interactions (Kim & Sax, 2009). Another study focused on the impact of social integration and social support in the first year of higher education. The results found that difficulty in establishing and maintaining social supports was a pervasive factor in student withdrawal. Also notable in the findings was that none of the student participants that resided at home during their first year

withdrew from study (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Such supports can function as stabilising elements, during what is often a harrowing transition from secondary education to higher education.

## **2.3 Behaviour, development, motivation, and wellness**

In this section, attention will be given to the theories related to human behaviour, development, motivation, and wellness. These theories provide the lens through which research data was examined.

### **2.3.1 Lewin's equation**

Kurt Lewin conceptualised behaviour as the function of personal factors (such as attributes, beliefs, goals, and aspirations) and environmental factors, both physical and social. This is not quantifiable but is rather meant to demonstrate the dynamic interchange between personal and environmental factors with regard to behaviour (Lewin, 1946). Deferring to this model, all behaviours are resultant of the interchange between person and environment. With regard to behaviour, this study will focus on the obstacles or challenges that students encounter in their lived environment, and the elements of their experiences that allow them to succeed academically, in spite of those obstacles.

### **2.3.2 Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory**

Urie Bronfenbrenner has taken Lewin's work and synthesised it into his *Ecological Systems Theory of Child Development*. His theory posits that a child's



development is impacted by a range of factors nested in the various layers of their ecological environment (Härkönen, 2007). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model presents six interdependent levels, with the individual at the centre of a broadening social context with which s/he interacts (Van Schalkwyk, 2019):

**The individual** – central and pivotal to the ecological systems theory, the individual is viewed through the lens of her/his own respective understanding and belief structures, as related to the world around her or him

**Microsystems** – the routine, roles, and interpersonal interactions of the individual, as related to particular contexts, including family, friends and age peers, neighbours, the classroom (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) and any other environment in which the individual actively or directly participates (Härkönen, 2007)

**Mesosystems** – this constitutes the interactions between microsystems inhabited by the developing person. For example, parent-staff engagements at TSiBA would bring the family and educational institution microsystems into contact.

**Exosystems** – ecological systems that yield an impact on the development of the individual, without necessarily requiring the direct participation or influence of the person. For example, TSiBA's interaction with recruiting organisations or with other education institutions.

**Macrosystem** – the overarching influence of culture, subculture, or other broader contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), such as the low SES living condition on the Cape Flats; high rates of youth unemployment including resources, risks, belief systems, opportunities and obstacles, and typified social exchanges (Härkönen, 2007)

**Chronosystem** – the impact of time on microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). A second- or third-year student may engage differently with TSiBA staff and peers than in her/his first year.

### 2.3.3 Self-determination theory

People, however, are not passive subjects in their environment. They have a natural desire to engage with their environment, and to both subsume and assimilate into local values and cultural norms (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). This understanding is essential to self-determination theory (SDT). SDT is a synthesis of six mini-theories- or a *macro-theory*- orientated around human motivation, well-being, and personal development. (McFarlane, 2016).

In seeking to understand the phenomenon of resilience among non-traditional students, the robust and thorough treatment of motivation and wellness proffered in SDT is both relevant and valuable. The mini-theories that constitute SDT are as follows:

#### 2.3.3.1 Cognitive evaluation theory

The first theoretical element of SDT is cognitive evaluation theory (CET). CET focuses on the impacts of socialisation and social context on *intrinsic motivation*, or the drive toward activities not yielding a tangible or obvious reward (Ryan, Williams, Patrick, & Deci, 2009). CET places significant emphasis how an individual's sense of autonomy and competence impacts her/his intrinsic motivations, and how various experiential elements can serve to foster or diminish them. An individual's perception of her/his agency and ability in thinking and activity is

undeniably linked to the likelihood that they will embrace and incorporate said thinking and activity.

Recognising this is essential to gaining an understanding of the paths of non-traditional students, who at points in their respective experiences may encounter a dearth of choice in academic pursuits, as well as struggles and obstacles impacting academic achievement that may ultimately diminish their academic engagement (Ryan, 2009).

#### *2.3.3.2 Organismic integration theory*

Organismic integration theory (OIT) is the second mini-theory contributing to SDT. In OIT, there is concern given to how *extrinsic motivations*- or environmental and experiential conditions, dictates, and norms that motivate behaviours become regulating factors in behaviour. OIT suggests that the process of extrinsic motivation internalisation is enhanced when extrinsic motivations are perceived as a matter of choice, with relative ease in engagement, coming from a familiar or trusted source (Ryan, 2009). In seeking to determine the impact of home, community, and societal elements- with particular regard to educational pursuits and outcomes- the understanding of how external systems become internal drives proposed in OIT provides invaluable guidance.

#### *2.3.3.3 Causality orientations theory*

The third wing of SDT is the causality orientations theory (COT), which views the acclimation to environment through the lens of the individual. In COT, the individual is either autonomy-oriented- or driven by personal interest- or control-oriented, acquiescing to social controls and external reward structures. Greater levels of autonomy and agency in behaviour contribute to higher levels of well-being. (Ryan, et al., 2009)

#### *2.3.3.4 Basic psychological needs theory*

The basic psychological needs theory draws direct connection between need satisfaction and overall wellness. Each respective need influences an individual's experience of wellness, and the impact of one's respective experience is determined by how that experience contributes to need satisfaction (Ryan, 2009). For those seeking to identify and address the factors that may impede non-traditional students in South Africa, consideration must be given to the impact of basic needs- such as food and lodging- on the student's ability to engage with academic opportunity and meet the demands therein.

#### *2.3.3.5 Goal contents theory*

The next pillar of SDT is goal contents theory (GCT). GCT asserts that material and concerns of status are of little importance to the enhancement of well-being. By contrast, interpersonal relationships, personal development, and a sense of relatedness and engagement with community contribute to overall health and wellness.

#### *2.3.3.6 Relationship motivation theory*

The relationship motivation theory (RMT)- most recently incorporated into SDT- posits that interpersonal interactions are essential to the well-being of an individual, and that the quality of these interactions correlates to the individual's overall experience of need satisfaction, with regard to relatedness, autonomy, and competence (McFarlane, 2016). This point is of particular relevance in examining the benefits and challenges posed in interpersonal relationships and engagement with the local community. In attempting to better understand of the success of the TSiBA educational model, it is necessary to consider the day-to-day interactions between members of the school community, and how these relationships impact the learner, both personally and academically.

#### **2.3.4 The PERMA model**

While SDT offers a valuable perspective on the concepts of motivation, development, and well-being, Martin Seligman (2011) offers another concept of wellness. Seligman's expressed his theory of flourishing in the design of the PERMA model- (McFarlane, 2016). The PERMA model recognises five elements as beneficial to the pursuit of happiness, personal fulfillment, and meaning in experience: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (Seligman, 2017).



Figure 2: The PERMA model (“The PERMA Model”, 2017)

#### 2.3.4.1 Positive emotions

The PERMA model posits that optimism and maintaining of a positive view of experience and circumstance may be beneficial as such a perspective may enhance the individual’s enjoyment of daily living. Maintaining such a perspective may also contribute to the individual’s willingness and capability to address new challenges creatively (Oades, Robinson, Green, & Spence, 2011). Understanding the experience of positive emotions is critical to the study of resilience, as positive experiences of a situation or setting may promote autonomy and competence, as well as a sense of relatedness to the situation, setting, and experience (Ryan, 2009).

#### 2.3.4.2 Engagement

The engagement aspect of the PERMA model suggests that interests and activities that absorb the attention of promote positive emotional and experiential outcomes. These activities may enhance intellectual acumen, skill sets, and emotional capacities (Oades et al., 2011).

#### *2.3.4.3 Relationships*

Like RMT in SDT (Ryan 2009), the PERMA model recognises the inherent importance and influence of interpersonal relationships in the human experience. The theory posits that strong and healthy relationships not only allow for positive experiences of connectedness, love, and intimacy, but also serve as mitigating factors in conditions of adversity. Positive relationships are so essential to the human psyche that research has shown that even the threat of social isolation may activate the pain centre of the brain (“The PERMA Model”, 2017). With the potential for such significant emotional influence, the experience of interpersonal relationships in a given context may greatly impact the individual’s experience of that context overall (Ryan, 2009).

#### *2.3.4.4 Meaning*

The fourth element of the PERMA model is the necessity for meaningful and purposeful life activities and experiences. Positive experiences of meaning are fostered by an understanding of the greater role of activities carried out on a day-to-day basis (Oades et al., 2011). This understanding may foster intrinsic motivation toward such activities, enhancing experiences of competence and connectedness, as related to such activities (Ryan, 2009).

#### *2.3.4.5 Achievement*

The PERMA model recognises that achievement- and the sense of accomplishment that may accompany it- drives further positive outcomes (The PERMA Model, 2017). In achieving goals and preferred outcomes, the individual’s

sense of competence is buoyed, enhancing the likelihood for further engagement with similar tasks and challenges (Ryan, 2009)

### **2.3.5 Circumscription and compromise**

Gottfredson's *theory of circumscription and compromise* (1981) offers insight into the socialisation process by which children (and subsequently young adults) come to understand, select, and follow career paths. Gottfredson is careful to give special attention to the weight of socioeconomic status and gender in this decision-making process, as each may serve to shape professional ideations from a very young age. In the context of this study, two aspects of Gottfredson's theorisation are of particular note: an individual's knowledge and understanding of occupational options, and his/her perceived ability to access said occupational options (1981).

## **2.4 Resilience**

### **2.4.1. Defining resilience**

The concept of resilience is central to this research. Resilience is the phenomenon of an individual being able to adapt to and thrive under adverse conditions. It is a set of dynamic and innumerable interactions that contribute to positive outcomes (Van Rensburg, Theron, & Rothmann, 2018), despite significant risks, which may include abuse, neglect, poverty, war, chronic illness, under-resourced communities, and the loss of parental figures (Jefferis & Theron, 2018).



### **2.4.2 Resilience among young people**

As young people are inherently vulnerable, adversity can diminish positive outcomes for them, and prove deleterious to their positive development (Theron & Theron, 2014). Those that are able to withstand and adjust to adverse conditions are not inherently special. Instead, various elements in their environment and their interactions with that environment have encouraged them toward positive outcomes (Van Rensburg, et al., 2018). This study seeks to explore those elements as exhibited in the narratives of successful students.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the theoretical framework within which this study was conceived and conducted. Multiple theories and concepts were explored in the discussion of the potential benefits embedded in the educational environment. Theories of Bronfenbrenner and Lewin provided an understanding of human behaviour and experience embedded in context. Self-determination theory was discussed, offering insight into human motivation and behaviour, while the introduction of the PERMA model provided a lens through which well-being could be assessed. Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise was discussed to emphasise the impact of formative conditions on career aspirations. Finally, the concept of resilience and its application to this study was discussed. In the next chapter, literature will be presented to establish the context of education in South Africa, as well as the broader scope of educational practices and outcomes.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **3.1 Preface**

This study seeks to better understand academic success of students from disadvantaged backgrounds by analysing the narratives of their lived experiences. In this chapter, attention is given to the factors embedded in the student experience that may influence academic success.

This chapter engages with the South African context, the country's history of colonialism and apartheid, and the interplay of that history with modern conditions. These modern conditions are outlined to provide an understanding of the challenges facing South African students, embedded at the individual level, in the household, the local community, and broader society.

Next, literature focused on educational delivery and resilience in the context of education is reviewed. In this discussion, specific attention is given to the potential benefits and pitfalls students may encounter in the college context, and how these may impact the ambitions and pursuits (and lived experiences) of students.

Finally, there is a discussion of the TSiBA educational model. Attention will be given to institutional student achievement and outcomes, as well as the ways in which this model contributes to the wellness and efficacy of students.

### **3.2 A history and perpetuation of disparity and deprivation**

In 1994, South Africa embarked on a monumental task- transitioning beyond the cumulative legacy of colonialism and the apartheid system. More than two decades removed from the establishment of a more representative democratic government, the nation finds itself still struggling to undo inherited social and economic inequities, as well adjust to the modern challenges that hinder its developmental trajectory and the degree to which the problems can be addressed (Burger, van der Berg, van der Walt, & Yu, 2017). Because of the systemic deprivation imposed by the laws and policies of the apartheid government (Naidoo et al., 2017), this modern-day disparity is still drawn dominantly along racial lines (Teeger, 2015).

#### **3.2.1 The foundations of disempowerment**

Under the apartheid government, Black South Africans were relocated by force to bantustans, or reservations in remote areas of country. With poverty rampant in these areas, physically able men were forced into migrant labour in cities far from home, in order to earn a living, and provide for themselves and their families (Dube-Addae, 2019). The demands of migrant labour saw men spending as much as 11 months away from their homes and families each year (Naidoo et al., 2017). These drastic separations contributed to an enduring degradation of the family structure.

The prolonged absence of husbands meant that wives had to manage the stressors of the household on their own (Mazibuko, 2000). Mothers often had to take on the roles traditionally performed by the husband, ranging from farming and home

repairs to child discipline. Without the presence of a supportive husband, such obligations could prove overwhelming for the wife and mother. These conditions also strained marital ties between the husband and wife and weakened the father's connection with his children (Mazibuko, 2000).

While there were some educational and economic improvements for non-white South Africans from the 1950s-1970s, the 1980s saw the apartheid government implement new policies that served to undermine the ability of Black South Africans to access the economy (Naidoo et al., 2017). Initiatives such as the Manpower Training Act of 1981 were enacted (Maharaswa, 2013), ostensibly to educate and equip non-white South Africans for skilled labour. Such policies were crafted with the intent to advance the white South African economy and society with Black labour (Naidoo et al., 2017). For Black South Africans- already denied citizenship and any semblance of privilege in this society- these legislative acts served only to further disenfranchise a population already coping with systemic deprivation.

Ultimately, this legislation- being both poorly-intended (2017) and poorly-resourced - failed to connect labourers to employment opportunities and served to further disenfranchise and disrupt the already repressed Black population (Maharaswa, 2013).

Mass schooling in South Africa, from its nascency in the early 1900's, was traditionally provisioned along racial lines (Chisholm, 2012). Mission schools that sought to education Black South Africans would eventually themselves starved of resources, and the minority government effectively seized control of these institutions,

less for the betterment of the Black South African than to crush rising African nationalism. Concurrently, Black South Africans were being forcefully relocated in Bantustans, and deprived further and further of resources and access to physical and educational infrastructure (Chisholm, 2012).

This societal framework persisted, functioning for the benefit of white South Africans, and to the detriment of Black South Africans. Under the apartheid structure, Black South Africans were little more than a cheap labour force, deprived of citizenship and ownership, and thus dependent upon migrant work for basic survival. As such, agency in vocation was denied for generations of Black South Africans, a protected privilege for the minority white population (Naidoo et al., 2017). Concurrently, the former apartheid government was spending as much as four times as much per child to educate white students as was allocated for the education of Black students (Lemon & Battersby-Lennard, 2009). In schools designated for Black South Africans, there were more than 40 students per teacher, compared to just 19 students per teacher in white schools. Of those teachers in Black schools, an appalling 85% were underqualified for their positions, versus just 3.4 in white schools. This meant that there was just one qualified teacher for every 265 Black students (Tobias, 1988).

This disregard of need and withholding of resources inflicted on generations of Black South Africans serves to maintain a self-perpetuating economic disparity that persists in modern times (Louw, Bayat, & Eigelaar-Meets, 2011).

### **3.2.2 The modern manifestations of historical oppression**

Emerging from a history of economic and individual repression and restriction, and contending with global economic challenges, Black people in present-day South Africa still face significant obstacles in social and environmental infrastructures (Dube-Addae, 2019), often enduring the “foreclosed vocational choice” and “circumscribed and frustrated aspiration” of past generations (Naidoo et al., 2017, p. 3). For those able to find work, there is no guarantee of social mobility. With daunting unemployment - even pervasive in some regions- throughout the country, South African households often rely on a single income to provide for the needs of the family. Coupled with a proliferation of low wage work, this can result in little or no genuine possibility for the conditional improvement of individuals, families, and communities, despite engagement with work opportunities (Lilenstein, Woolard, & Leibbrandt, 2016).

In primary and secondary education, public and private schools offer virtually night-and-day experiences. Private schools that were once reserved for white students have integrated, but capacity and cost render this option unattainable for the vast majority of the South African student population, preserving well-resourced schools as a privilege for the wealthy of South Africa (Spaull, 2015). Conversely, public school students face low-resourced facilities, with primary school Learner-Education ratios as high as 38 students per teacher in some areas of the country (“Class sizes”, 2018).

Of those South Africans who are able to engage and complete high school and connect with higher education opportunities, only 27% complete their course of study in the prescribed time period. Dismayingly, 55% of registered undergraduates never complete their study (Prince, 2017).

To create access to the economy for members of low-resourced and underserved communities will require greater access to education that truly equips students to participate and excel in the modern economy. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) was established in 2009 to streamline the nation's higher education system, with the ultimate goal of a knowledgeable and diversely-skilled South African labour force. These efforts- intended to redress the aforementioned historical disparities- are impeded by low rates of high school matriculation (DBE 2015), and a dearth of qualified educators at the primary level (Armstrong, 2009).

### **3.3 Challenges encountered in the experience of the learner**

#### **3.3.1 Non-academic obstacles to academic achievement**

When considering the factors embedded in microsystems, mesosystems, and exosystems that influence behaviour, *family*, *peers*, and *local community* stand out for the proximal impacts they have, singularly and in tandem, on young people.

##### *3.3.1.1 Familial and interpersonal stressors*

With regard to youth distress, Mzikazi Nduna and Rachel Jewkes (2012) identified three major categories of psychological stress affecting South African youth. They identified *structural factors* yielding negative impacts on young people, including the death of a parent or parental figure, poverty, and unemployment; stressors related to the category of *home environment* include financial hardship,

physical abuse, and substance abuse, and stressors pertaining to *sexual relationship* typically affect women, including factors such as dating violence and disputed pregnancy.

Family disadvantage and the stressors inherent to it may contribute to a tension, turmoil, and conflict in the home setting, which may result in situations of abuse and violence (Meinck et al., 2017). Unfortunately, this destructive cycle manifests in many South African households, impacting the development of millions of young people (Van Schalkwyk, 2019).

In a study conducted in Durban to determine the prevalence of traumatic experiences in the lives of local youth. Collings, Valjee and Penning (2013) found that:

- 49% reported being assaulted in the home
- 32% reported witnessing family violence, and
- 26% reported being victims of emotional abuse

Consideration of these conditions and their cumulative effect on the mental health of the South African youth development is essential for any efforts to engage non-traditional students struggling to cope with past and present experiences of this familial and intimate violence.

### *3.3.1.2 Challenges endured in low-resourced communities*

The community structure has the potential to unify its members and their respective knowledge, skills, and abilities, with a sense of connectedness and shared responsibility (Lazarus, Seedat, & Naidoo, 2017). As posited in SDT, these conditions can foster the capacity of individuals toward resilience, empowerment, and



achievement (Ryan 2009). However, challenges to a healthy, thriving community can diminish positive outcomes for individuals inhabiting and participating in these communities. While familial violence can have undeniably deleterious effects on development, community violence is an even greater indicator of negative outcomes (Barbarin, Richter, & deWet, 2001). This is of particular relevance to this study, as 60% of South African youth witness violence in their local communities, and as much as 40% of South African youth may be personally assaulted in their local communities (Collings et al., 2013).

The psychological effects driven by enduring neighbourhood violence are of grave concern. The prevalence of violence as a norm in the day-to-day experience of young people- particularly in the context of poverty and poor social infrastructure- means that South African youth have a greater risk of demonstrating the developmental symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Scarpa, Haden, & Hurley, 2006), including depression and avoidance. PTSD may cause the individual to relive traumatic experiences- a trauma in and of itself- and perpetuate outcomes such as depression, anti-social behaviour, and frustrated cognitive development, thereby negatively impacting academic performance (Scarpa et al., 2006).

For those that come from supportive communities with strong socialisation and engagement, ever-present financial precarity, and limited economic access and opportunity may yield significant negative psychological impact on the home environment, which may drive the aforementioned challenges of familial violence, substance abuse, and general household psychological stress (Taylor, Stevens, Agho & Raphael, 2017).

Such economic conditions may contribute a variety of obstacles for the aspiring student. Home obligations or a lack of home resources may demand that students work to support themselves and/or others while pursuing their academic goals, which may negatively impact the student's ability to manage the collegiate expectations (McKay & Devlin, 2015). These struggles are also felt in the day-to-day experience, in which a student may not be able to meet daily personal needs- such as lodging and food- and the costs of education- such as tuition and books.

These conditions may contribute to reduced social competence, an increased risk for academic struggle and failure, and higher rates of school dropout (Barbarin & Richter, 1999).

### **3.3.2 Relative poverty**

Traumatic and troublesome elements of the youth experience are not the only factors that impede a learner's potential for academic success. A safe and healthy environ cannot compensate for a limited understanding or appreciation for education. Such a condition- as shaped and informed by socioeconomic factors such as poverty, limited education of parents or parental figures, or poor access to public services and information- can hinder the learner's potential for academic achievement (Anakwenze & Zuberi, 2013).

When considering academic and professional achievement, it is critical to address if the aspirant has been able to explore the career options available to them, and the academic requirements to follow any of these career paths (Gottfredson, 1981). The educational environment that shapes the learner must allow for the learner to

explore ways in which s/he might benefit from natural talents or pursue careers that are more reflective of the individual (Sheehy-Skeffington & Rea, 2017). In the absence of factors that contribute to the aspirant's knowledge of and ability to access career paths, the condition of *relative poverty* emerges.

Relative poverty- in the context of student development- is the coalescing of several conditions that hinder the individual's ability to progress and excel (Shumba & Naong, 2013). These conditions include lower parental educational achievement, a lack of parental knowledge with regard to educational protocols and processes, and limited time and financial resources for parents to spend "entertaining educational ambitions" of their children (p. 1023). While these conditions do not present the harrowing elements of trauma and violence, they can, nevertheless, be detrimental to academic and career aspirations (Albien & Naidoo, 2017). The role of parental expectations in the academic success of a child is undeniable (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010), and if parents have a narrow view of what their children *can* and *should* do, the child will share that limited vision.

### **3.3.3 The unsupportive classroom**

The aforementioned challenges impact millions of South African youth before they ever reach the school building. Upon arrival, they may encounter a new set of obstacles to maneuver on the path to academic achievement.

#### *3.3.3.1 Teacher ability, attitudes, and expectations*

South African teachers are on the front line of the enduring campaign to bring educational access and resources to their students. This is a great responsibility,

entailing a number of tasks and duties. Unfortunately, teachers may fail to recognise or address the needs of all their students. For many reasons, teacher engagement with students and may fail to provide adequate attention and support for those students toward academic achievement.

With resources limited at the national and local levels, some municipalities may struggle to provide sufficient financial incentive to maintain high-performing teachers. This attrition among qualified teachers increases the workload of remaining teachers and decreases the aggregate skills and abilities of the teaching workforce (Armstrong, 2009). Consequently, many students experience diminished academic performance (Fleisch, 2016).

Another issue that may contribute to negative academic outcomes hampers students is low expectations and general teacher attitudes. Labeling students “at-risk” or “vulnerable” may be counterproductive to the educational process, as such categorisations can have a chilling effect on the efforts of educators, and thus make their efforts part of the cycle of disempowerment (Gorski, 2013). Indeed, as the most consistent point of contact in the educational process for every student, the teacher should engage the student in a manner that promotes healthy student experiences of competence, agency, and relatedness. As it is with any authoritative position, the teacher sets the tone, establishes standards, and delineates expectations. If the teacher shows no enthusiasm, or struggles with student engagement, the student may be less likely to recognise the value of the educational experience, and subsequently less motivated to engage with the process (Gorski, 2013; Ryan, 2009).

Unfortunately, in the South African context, many students in poor, rural, and working-class areas suffer the consequences of this disparity of expectation and engagement. With resources strained, some teachers may focus their attentions, efforts and engagement on exceptional students, while providing underperforming students with little support or encouragement toward academic improvement and achievement (Fleisch, 2016). Inadequate education and training for teachers may contribute to these outcomes as well (Maharasa, 2013). Among developing nations, research has identified positive correlations between academic outcomes for students and test scoring for teachers (Bietenbeck, Piopiunik, & Widerhold 2015).

Such attitudes, inadequacies, and practices among teachers may serve to dampen the individual student's motivation to engage with class and study (Ryan, 2009), and thus perpetuate a cycle of low academic achievement and professional readiness (Bietenbeck et al., 2015).

#### *3.3.3.2 Language barriers*

South Africa is a linguistically diverse nation, with 11 official languages. A history of colonialism and the evolution of the modern global business world has resulted in English as the de facto shared language among South Africans (Pennycook, 2014). However, only 10% of South Africans speak English as a first language. In the school building, the complexities and challenges presented by this are evidenced in outcomes, as language limitations may prevent students from fully engaging with academic material and drive deficiencies in understanding of subject matter and concepts presented in educational programming (Howie, 2003).

### *3.3.3.3 Challenges to socialisation with classmates*

Socialisation is a primal instinct for humans, and interactions with peers influence social competence, motivations, and behaviour (Ryan, 2009). When efforts to engage with peers in the school setting produce disappointing or even hurtful outcomes, students may perceive the school setting to be a hostile environment. This may result in a sense of disconnectedness with the school community and the process of learning, which will inevitably diminish student motivation to engage with said process (Ryan, 2009).

For many Black South African students, this is even further complicated by matters of race and class. While most students from low-resourced communities are relegated to attending struggling schools, some are able to engage with better-resourced schools. The benefits of such provisions for students may be great, but often, so are the new challenges that they face in these new settings. The student bodies of well-resourced primary and secondary schools in South Africa are typically more diverse than the schools that serve the majority of Black students, increasing the likelihood of racial conflict (Teeger, 2015). Further, as issues of representation among faculty and staff in the post-apartheid educational system present challenges and spur debate, transformation at the university level has also presented challenges. (Jansen, 2012).

When poorer Black students access schools formerly-preserved for white students, they may experience some of their new peers- and teachers and school faculty- as hostile and unwelcoming (Teeger, 2015). For these students, experiences

of both interpersonal and structural racism may significantly impact the motivation and ability to engage with the academic material and the overall learning environment (Ryan, 2009).

### **3.4 Resilience and empowerment**

There is significant research supporting the assertion that young people emerging from disadvantaged backgrounds are at much greater risk than others for school attrition early on in life, contributing to the likelihood of detrimental outcomes later, perpetual unemployment, substance abuse, and other detrimental behaviours and outcomes (Collings, et al., 2013). There is in fact a clear positive correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. Children from stable, supportive, well-resourced homes demonstrate much greater social competence and independence than children from lower-income homes (Barbarin & Richter, 1999). Conversely, social vulnerability- resulting from any number of risk factors in a child's social and physical environment- has been linked to greater levels of aggression, cognitive and emotional dysfunction, and even decreased familial attachment (Richaud, 2013).

There are, however, protective factors that can mitigate these negative outcomes by contributing to the resilience of the learner. Resilience is the ability to withstand or overcome environmental elements that stand counter to an individual's ability to achieve and flourish. This phenomenon is multidimensional, and the protective factors that foster resilience may vary from one person to another (Ward, Martin, Theron, & Distiller, 2007).

Anthony's (2008) study of urban poverty outlined four "clusters profiles" for

children sharing similarly disadvantaged backgrounds: Protected, High-risk, Coping, and Disconnected; in this sequence, the children were assigned a rating based on assessments of success in school, delinquent behaviour, self-reported levels of drug use, social engagement, self-esteem, supervision, and discipline. Participants classified as *disconnected* had the poorest academic performances, evidenced little community or neighborhood support, high levels of delinquency, and some risk factors within their respective families. *High-risk* participants had low marks, manifested the highest levels of drug use than other clusters, and received little supervision or discipline. Participants deemed to be *coping* were inclined toward social isolation, had low self-esteem and poor confidence, and academic outcomes (Anthony, 2008). In stark contrast to the other clusters, participants from the *protected* cluster demonstrated high levels of commitment to education and academic achievement, evidenced healthy peer interactions, and little or no delinquent behaviour or drug use, and enjoyed the highest levels of community support (“neighbourhood cohesion”), and strong familial support (Anthony, 2008). Although they endured financial hardship and other negative elements of poverty, these children come from otherwise healthy homes and supportive communities.

The Anthony study does not stand alone in the exploration of protective factors. Worrell and Hale (2001) focused on students from disadvantaged backgrounds that remained engaged in the educational system to completion, despite risk factors that could have caused them to disengage. The study identified hope as a common thread in their experiences. In this context, Worrell and Hale (2001) conceptualised hope as the learners’ ability to envision a positive future for themselves. Ann Masten



(2001) views these instances as a product of a common drive to seek out positive engagements and outcomes. Masten contends that resilience is a product of human adaptability, and that youth, in demonstrating this adaptability and resilience, will put themselves into situations that allow for more positive outcomes.

Malindi and Theron (2010) have lent credence to this contention. Their research explored the lives of South African street youth and found that these young people often demonstrated behaviours reflective of resilience. This *hidden resilience* manifested in healthy levels of self-esteem and strong socialisation, allowing the youths to enjoy surprisingly hearty lives, despite enduring the condition of homelessness (Kidd & Shahar, 2008; Malindi & Theron, 2010).

Hidden resilience might also be seen- at least in part- as demonstrative of agency and empowerment. Empowerment, as a product of equitable socialisation and personal agency, can mitigate environmental challenges and contribute positively to mental health and general positive outcomes (Ungar & Teram, 2000). This resonates with Paulo Freire's (1970) notions of the impact of equitable socialisation and personal agency, pivotal in his concept of liberation.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire argues that for liberation to occur, those being oppressed must first- with the knowledge of their oppression- destroy the roles of *oppressor* and *oppressed*. The oppressed must shed their role as oppressed, in order to take full ownership of their future. In achieving this, the cycle of oppression is broken. This shift, according to Freire (1970), must be initiated by the oppressed- as the oppressed have to recognise the oppressor to allow for equitable exchange- and

therefore must be the product of personal agency and resilience.

### **3.5 The educational environ as a protective factor**

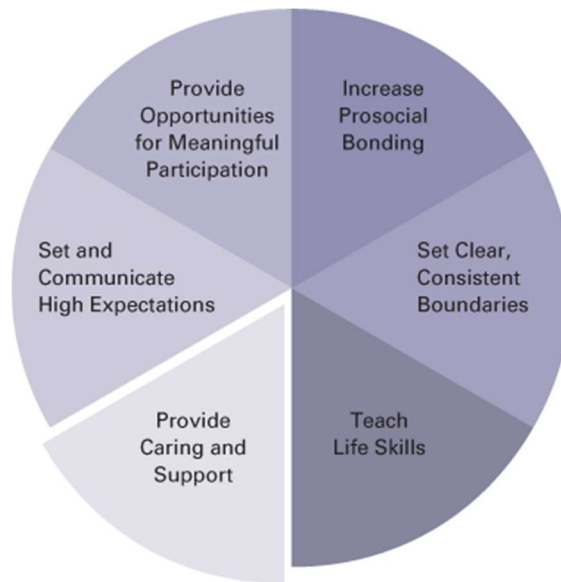
The school building at its best is positioned to foster the personal, academic, and professional potential of the student. Not only can this environ foster academic achievement, but it may at times serve as an oasis of support and stability, in the midst of personal strife. In seeking to maximise the benefit potential for schools, Johnson and Lazarus (2008) advocate an approach that incorporates risk reduction and the promotion of resilience, engaging supports among family, peers, school staff, and community members, within a school framework that promotes personal health. Ungar and Teram (2000) argue that the process of empowerment could be facilitated through “interventions and policies that enable vulnerable individuals to experience both power in their social interactions and a measure of personal agency” (p. 245).

While holistic engagement with environmental conditions facing students may contribute to positive outcomes, it is understood that the scope of this impact may be limited in reach. For “[e]ducators cannot eradicate poverty, remove neighborhood gangs, stop cultural violence, heal parental addictions, or prevent the myriad of other types of stress, risk, and trauma that many students face daily” (Henderson, 2013, p. 23).

Despite this reality, inherent in the role of educator is the potential nurture students’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivations toward academic persistence and

achievement. Through positive engagements and, fostering their resilience to environmental and experiential hindrances (Henderson, 2013) and increasing the likelihood that students will engage with educational programming and broader academic goals and efforts (Ryan, 2009).

The Resiliency Wheel identifies six resiliency-fostering directives for the school as standards for quality education, guidance, and social support in the school, and essential to the academic achievement of students. The first aspect of the Resiliency Wheel- which is identified as the foundation for the remaining aspects- is that the school provide care and support. The other expectations for the school environment posited by the Resiliency Wheel are that the school experience sets and communicates high expectations, allows the student to participate meaningfully in the educational process, increases the student's capacity for socialisation and healthy interpersonal interactions, sets clear and consistent parameters for behaviour, and prepares students to manage challenging situations and circumstances through life skills development (Henderson, 2013).



*Figure 2: The Resiliency Wheel (Henderson, 2013)*

These standards for beneficial school setting are echoed by many researchers, who see the school as having the potential to mitigate less supportive conditions for students coming from homes that may not foster- or may even hinder- their development (Gorski, 2013; Richaud, 2013). Many of the students that have overcome such obstacles have cited school as preferable to home, and the exchange between the student and the school environ has been cited as a strong factor in the development of social competence (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005). Such students- when asked to identify the most beneficial aspects of their respective educational experiences- cited teachers that connected with them personally, while demonstrating enthusiasm as educators (Dass-Brailford, 2005).

Collins and Millard (2011) propose an interactive approach to education, that integrates - among other things- an understanding of the student experience, resource availability and access, and a positive experience of educational engagement. Such an

approach may serve to mitigate conditions that might otherwise prove to be prohibitive for the aspirant student.

It is in the real and potential value of educational environ to diminish negative elements and outcomes- as demonstrated by the relevant literature- that the theoretical framework and analytical lens for this research resides.

### **3.6 TSiBA – Bridging the gaps**

Such comprehensive engagement by higher education providers would be of great value, whether providing non-traditional students with needed supports (Henderson, 2013) and challenges that recognise and hone their abilities (Gorski, 2013), or fostering life skills that help students to better manage the challenges and conflicts they encounter outside of the school walls (Lai et al., 2013). The TSiBA model may provide this structure.

The TSiBA educational system offers a holistic approach to higher education. Following a community college model, TSiBA serves a diverse array of students, many of whom come from low-resourced communities (TSiBA 2017 Annual Report, n.d.). By absorbing tuition costs TSiBA mitigates one of the greatest financial obstacles to educational pursuit (Pugins, 2016).

Further, the TSiBA model emphasises academic progress and achievement, personal reflection, agency and self-motivation, and community engagement. While studying at TSiBA, students enjoy not only high-quality academic instruction and

supports, but also a network of personal supports, ranging from formal structures- such as the Centre for Student Support- to the student community itself. TSiBA's curricula provide many points of academic cooperation and collaboration among students- including group projects and volunteer opportunities. Further, I was able to personally observe- and even to facilitate- life skills development programming built into the TSiBA curricula wherein students are encouraged to engage with personal and emotional development in a group setting.

Additionally, TSiBA students are encouraged to engage with their local communities as educators and mentors (McFarlane, 2016; Pugin, 2016), which may perpetuate a positive cycle of student support, guidance, and achievement. This innovative and holistic approach would appear to yield significant positive outcomes.

TSiBA- while serving students from various low-resourced communities in South Africa- achieved a throughput rate of 56%- eclipsing the national average of 25%- in 2017. Further, BBA students that have graduated from TSiBA enjoy a 92% employment rate (TSiBA 2017 Annual Report, n.d.). These statistics demonstrate institutional success in student retention and achievement, as well as in student preparation for participation in the South African job market. For these reasons, TSiBA presents an exceptional locale to explore the interaction of student and environment, and to gain an understanding of why some students enjoy levels of resilience necessary withstand their hardships and remain on the path to academic achievement.

### **3.7 Chapter summary**

This chapter introduced literature relevant to this study. Research related to the history of labour and education in the South African was presented. This was followed by a discussion of the modern manifestations of this history- and the challenges wrought by it- to contextualise this study and establish the conditions that face many South African students. Finally, the ethos and functioning of the TSiBA model was presented, as backdrop and context to the current study.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 4.1 Introduction

This study sought to understand the motivations of students from adverse backgrounds who have either remained engaged in the educational process or returned to their educational career at the post-secondary level. In light of the personal and experiential nature of the information deemed necessary for understanding this phenomenon, I believed the most effective approach would be to engage directly with students fitting these criteria. I conducted a case study of a sample student population, consisting of second-year or higher year status students enrolled at the TSiBA institution's Cape Town campus at the time of the study. Given the goal of understanding the varying and unique experiences, it became apparent that a constructivist qualitative approach would provide the appropriate way to gain insight into these students, their resilience to adverse conditions, and their commitment to their educational careers.

Constructivist approaches seek to understand how people build their own unique constructs of reality, and their meaningful understanding of the world and their experience in it (Raskin, 2002). Such an understanding may be enhanced through narrative analysis, as the words and viewpoints of the individual may provide a firsthand account of a particular phenomenon. It is therefore appropriate to employ such an approach to gain an understanding of the personal and experiential elements contributing to the resilience of students and their capacity for academic achievement.



In this chapter, I describe the methodology employed for this study and discuss why this methodology was deemed appropriate to achieve research goals. I will discuss the research design adopted for the study, the research participants, the research procedure, the data collection process, the data analysis methodology, and the ethical considerations involved in the research process. I will also discuss the research, from my perspective, in the section on reflexivity.

## **4.2 Research design**

I was first introduced to the TSiBA institution after expressing a motivation to examine resilience in the context of adversity. I was granted the opportunity to come to TSiBA and witness firsthand its day-to-day operations, as well as to become acquainted with the curriculum and community. I initially engaged with faculty and observed student-faculty interactions at the Cape Town campus. I was even permitted to observe and support the Head, Heart & Soul Weekend, a programme for male students focused on personal and life skills development (there was a similar programme for females students to which I was not privy). To further deepen my understanding of TSiBA and its community, I made inquiries into volunteering my time at the institution and was given formal consent to volunteer my service at the Centre for Student Support.

After developing my thesis proposal, I secured ethical clearance from Stellenbosch University and permission from the TSiBA management board to conduct the proposed study. One member of the Student Support staff played an

invaluable role in facilitating my contact with the students. As gate keeper, she was able to link me with informal student groups who frequented the facilities of the Centre. Eventually, I was permitted to observe and support day-to-day activities at the Centre for Student Support. This engagement helped to broaden my perspective of the institution as I concomitantly began to set up my research process.

#### **4.2.1 The case study**

This research relied upon primary source data collected by way of a case study. The case study offers many advantages that are of particular benefit to the understanding of experiential phenomena. The case study allows the researcher to better engage with phenomena in the context of day-to-day experience of the individual. This may provide rich, detailed information that might not be procured through other methods (Ridder, 2017).

Participants in this research were recruited from the greater student body of TSIBA- Cape Town, and all participants were second-year or higher students. While general e-mail messages were deployed initially to engage with potential participants, recruitment was buoyed greatly by the efforts and advice provided by the staff at the Centre for Student Support. Because of their openness and willingness, I was able to engage with the students despite being an outsider to this familial setting.

#### **4.2.2 Research participants**

Participants in this study ranged in age, from 20-33 years old. There were six male participants, and four female participants, purposively sampled as examples of students in good standing with the institution, and possessing a strong firsthand

experience of the student environment. All participants were either second- or third-year students at TSiBA – Cape Town, allowing for the participants to provide insight into their experience at TSiBA that a first-year student may have struggled to provide. Participants for this study were recruited with the assistance of the Student Support Centre. While there were no clear intimate relationships among participants, this nevertheless presents the potential for snowballing in the research group.

This study sought to understand personal motivations and experienced supports of students that were studying despite previous or current adversity. To achieve this, an explorative qualitative research design using individual interviews was deemed suitable to gather the data to gain insight into these students, their resilience to adverse conditions, and their commitment to their educational careers.

#### **4.3 Research procedure**

In order to implement this study, a number of standards and protocols were observed. My thesis proposal was subjected to ethical review within Stellenbosch University's Department of Psychology, wherein the proposal was screened for its academic merit and ethical soundness. Next, the proposal was considered by the university's Research Ethics Committee.

After meeting the approval of both of these entities, the thesis proposal was presented to the leadership at TSiBA, to attain institutional consent to conduct the research at the TSiBA- Cape Town campus with the TSiBA student body.

When this final institutional approval was secured, the participant recruitment process commenced. Further discussion of ethical matters will be discussed in the *Ethical considerations* section of this chapter.

### **4.3.1 Data collection**

For this study, there were two levels of data collected: *primary data sourcing* and *general engagement and observation*.

#### *4.3.1.1 Primary data sourcing*

Primary data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews held with ten participants selected from the TSIBA student body. These interviews ranged from 30-90 minutes, and employed a semi-structured format (Harrell & Bradley, 2009) using the following questions:

Where is home for you?

What's it like growing up there?

Tell me about your neighbourhood

How is your relationship with your family?

Tell me about them

Tell me about your friends and how they've affected your life

How was school for you when you were growing up?

Tell me about the people that affected your educational experience?

How did they impact it?

How did you get to TSiBA?

What has been your experience here at TSiBA, from the beginning, until now?

What aspects of yourself have contributed to your academic progress at TSiBA?

What aspects of the TSiBA educational system have contributed to your academic progress at TSiBA?

Participants were also asked if there was additional pertinent information that they wanted to provide.

#### *4.3.1.2 General engagement and observation*

From August of 2014 to December of 2015, I immersed myself in the TSiBA experience. During the interview process, I found myself more and more engaged- and frankly, enamoured- with the functioning of the TSiBA – Cape Town campus. In January of 2015, I sent a request to a senior staff member in the Student Support Centre, requesting permission to volunteer and contribute to this space. After some discussion, my request was granted, and I was invited to support the efforts of Student Support Centre. My previous experience- as both a peer counsellor with Whitman-Walker Clinic in Washington, DC and as a tutor for primary students in Washington, DC, respectively- provided some foundation for me to engage with students academically and personally. After some time, I officially joined the staff of the Centre for Student Support as a Student Counsellor. In various volunteer roles, and in

my role as a Student Counsellor, I was able to engage with a number of students, each with their own story to tell. Working with TSiBA students and staff, I gained a more intimate understanding of the TSiBA educational model and how it achieves its positive outcomes.

#### **4.4 Data analysis**

This study sought to identify why some people push through obstacles for educational pursuits. A primary goal of this study was to gain an understanding of the motivations and means that ultimately support such outcomes. I also sought an understanding of the interplay between conditions and experiences, and positive outcomes. As I considered these aims, and the methodological approaches I could utilise in this research, I decided to employ an inductive thematic analysis approach to analyse the interview data. Inductive thematic analysis seemed most appropriate to achieve these goals, as the flexibility and openness in data collection and analysis could be most useful in examining a phenomenon with roots so embedded in the knowledge of individuals (Boyatzis, 1998).

Thematic analysis is a process designed for systematically identifying, organising, and gaining a clearer understanding of data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis allows for either a *deductive* approach- wherein the data is collected and analysed in the context and framework of existing theory- or an *inductive* approach- wherein the data is collected and analysed in a manner that relies on the data

to dictate the theory. As such, thematic analysis averts theory, allowing for versatility in application (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline the following six phases prescribed for the thematic analysis of data.

#### **4.4.1. Data familiarisation**

Thematic analysis calls for the researcher to immerse himself in the data. As I was the interviewer in this study, I was able to begin interacting with the data at its nascence. I also personally transcribed these interviews, which demanded a highly focused perusal of the data. Finally, I read each interview transcript through several times, to engage again with the material, having conducted all the interviews personally.

Finally, I also personally transcribed all interviews verbatim. Each participant was aware well ahead of time that they would be participating in some form of probative interview, and they were also made aware that they would need to speak loudly, in order to ensure their voices were recorded clearly.

#### **4.4.2 Generating initial codes**

In this second phase of thematic analysis, an initial set of codes was generated from the research data. Each code represents a distinguishable element from the data that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon under study. (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

After reviewing and familiarising myself with the raw interview data, I began to identify and isolate the points that could be relevant to the phenomenon being studied. I sought to identify any experiences that might have an impact on the pursuit of educational goals. From the onset of the coding process, the targeting of this data capturing was intentionally vague. I first identified as many points of note that I could find. In the initial coding process, I utilised ATLAS.ti software to digitally demarcate and sort coded transcript items into positive and negative markers. These items were identified in the text, and then abridged to more generic, yet demonstrative codes. To demonstrate, consider the following original interview text:

*Basically, we didn't have a home. My parents had a bit of their own challenges at home. They were married, but they never stayed together, so it was like they were split apart. So, we moved around a lot, because we never had a place of our own, so we stayed either by renting or we stayed by family. Basically, I'll say home is where the heart was. That was home. We didn't have a physical room of our own.*

From this text, two data points were identified for this participant:

The first: *Basically, we didn't have a home... So, we moved around a lot, because we never had a place of our own, so we stayed either by renting or we stayed by family. Basically, I'll say home is where the heart was. That was home. We didn't have a physical room of our own.*

This segment was initially coded as indicating that the Jessica's parents were unable to provide stable lodging for their family.



The second: *My parents had a bit of their own challenges at home. They were married, but they never stayed together, so it was like they were split apart.*

This segment was initially coded as indicating that Jessica's parents did not have a stable relationship.

#### **4.4.3 Searching for themes**

The search for themes, essentially, is the beginning of the data analysis. In this phase, the collective coded data is broadly analysed, with the intent of finding themes, which are more generalised categories into which the previously-identified codes can be sorted. (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Multiple codes that could be viewed as similar were grouped into candidate themes. To demonstrate consider how the following codes were grouped into a theme:

*Felicia adheres strictly to her Muslim faith.*

*Jessica points to her strong faith as a motivation through difficult times.*

In the search for themes, these items were identified under the theme "Person supports", as they are personal characteristics that were perceived as having contributed positively to the educational careers and life experiences of the respective participants.

#### **4.4.4 Reviewing themes**

In the fourth phase of thematic analysis, there is a two-level process in the refinement of the candidate themes. Themes are first reviewed at the level of their

respective codes. If the codes do not make a coherent theme, the candidate theme may require revision or dismissal, and the coded items themselves would need to either be re-categorised, or themselves dismissed. If the extracted points do fit a logical pattern, then the candidate theme receives a second-level review.

At this second level of review, the remaining themes are first examined for validity in the context of the broader research. Next, the themes are reviewed collectively, to determine if they adequately represent the data set. (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

In the theme review process for this study, the candidate themes previously identified were all deemed relevant, correct, and thorough in relation to the data collected.

#### **4.4.5 Defining and naming themes**

In the fifth phase of thematic analysis, themes are refined to a final, coherent, and comprehensive presentation of the data. Broad themes are generated, each with a collection of sub-themes that, when taken together, present the whole of the data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

During this phase of the thematic analysis for this study, more generalised categories- or overarching themes- were identified, as well as subthemes that allowed for further organisation of influential experiential aspects identified in the collected data.

## **4.5 Ethical considerations**

### **4.5.1 Institutional approvals**

There were three formal approvals needed before I could commence with my study and collect data at the TSIBA – Cape Town campus: departmental approval from Stellenbosch University's Department of Psychology, formal ethical clearance from Stellenbosch University's Research Ethics Committee, and formal permission to conduct research from the TSIBA institutional leadership. However, in advance of receiving these formal permissions, I engaged informally with TSIBA leadership, to introduce myself, to convey the breadth and intent of my research, and to begin familiarising myself with the campus life.

Having established this relationship, I submitted my thesis proposal for formal review and approval from TSIBA leadership. Once I received a signed letter of approval from the institution (See Appendix D), I began to engage with TSIBA faculty and students to spread the word of my study to the student body, and secure volunteer participants.

### **4.5.2 Ethical considerations in working with research participants**

#### *4.5.2.1 Voluntary participation*

Before consenting to the interview, each research participant received a general invitation, within which they were provided with a brief summary of the study being conducted. They were advised that the interview would be recorded, all participation was voluntary, and that they could cease participation in the research at any time,

without personal consequence. They were also informed that all information provided in the interview would be treated confidentially, and that their personal information would be anonymized.

#### *4.5.2.2. Risks to participants in the research*

After significant deliberation with my research supervisor, it was determined that the research I intended to conduct would pose a “Medium” level of risk to the student participants. In order to address this, the Student Support section of TSiBA was contacted and requested to provide individual counselling to help participants in the event of an adverse outcome resulting from the interview process.

During the actual research process, there were no observed or reported incidents of any participant experiencing negative outcomes resulting from any aspect of the interview process.

#### *4.5.2.3 Participant compensation*

There is an interpersonal aspect to financial transactions that has the potential to influence the will of the payee, and in these interactions, it is understood that pay is offered because the consideration demanded in exchange for this payment might not otherwise be proffered (Dube-Addae, 2019). While these considerations weighed heavily in the establishment of the research recruitment process, it was necessary to acknowledge that students were being asked not only for their time, but to potentially inconvenience themselves- with regard to transportation and general schedule

disruption- to participate in this study. As such, participants were compensated R60 for their participation. Notice of compensation was provided in the initial call for participants, and compensation was provided upon completion of each interview.

## **4.6 Reflexivity**

In this section, I will present my reflection on this research from three perspectives: my role as a researcher, my position as a student of Stellenbosch University, and the experience and knowledge of self I brought to this process (McFarlane, 2016).

### **4.6.1 Reflexivity as the researcher**

Coming to know South Africa as a novice postgraduate student, I recognised parallels between the experiences of Black South Africans and Black Americans. For both peoples, ubiquitous systemic deprivation in the recent past has served to impede ambition and achievement. Modern America continues to grapple with the ongoing impact of slavery and the *Jim Crow* era, a period when anti-Black legislation and systematised brutality proliferated the US South, touching every aspect of Black life and Black-White interactions (Davis, 2003). These laws negatively impacted virtually every aspect of Black life. Northern discrimination against Black Americans- while less violent and prolific than in the South- yielded its greatest impacts in employment, schooling, and housing. Black Americans have also traditionally been policed and prosecuted most severely, by comparison with the White American population. These practices have served to remove men and women from their respective families,

homes, and communities. Imbalanced prosecution and imprisonment has also hindered many Black Americans with criminal records (Alexander, 2011), which may negatively impact employment prospects, further driving economic stagnation and hardship. These conditions have contributed to modern detriment, as the lack of Black wealth (Hedges, 2015) has left low-income communities with a perpetually inadequate public educational system that not only contends with funding challenges, but often relies on less qualified teachers (Duncombe, 2017). The result of these historical and modern conditions for Black Americans (Hedges, 2015) is much akin to the lingering detriment of colonialism, apartheid, and a perpetually inadequate public educational system for Black South Africans (“These three graphs”, 2017).

With this understanding, I sought to gain insight into the risk factors facing the students of South Africa- a young nation striving to redress such conditions- and the ideas and efforts that promote achievement in this context. These perspectives may offer greater insight into how educators and educational institutions might better foster achievement for students contending with adverse conditions.

I determined that I wanted to approach academic achievement at the collegiate level. Given the significant attrition among primary and secondary students in South Africa (DBE, 2015) I believed that maintaining good standing in collegiate study was a fitting criterion for “success” in choosing the research site and population. This population was further reduced to only include second- and third-year students. The rationale for excluding first-year students was that their academic standing would not be confirmed until year-end, and were also considered by the researcher to be in a period of adjustment to the collegiate routine. Students in the graduating class were

not included in this research due to anticipated conflicts with their respective highly demanding schedules.

It was apparent to me that such research could contribute positively to South African efforts to better engage and support those previously disengaged with educational opportunities. Personally, I recognise elements that served my educational career path in a variety of ways. Despite living in households that endured a variety of challenges, I was able to engage with various supports- including my family, my various school communities, youth organisations and programming- that ultimately allowed me to pursue various opportunities. Thus I appreciate the importance of these supports and the resilience phenomenon, as manifested in the educational career path.

As this study commenced, I endeavoured to be openminded in my expectations. However, I am informed by my own experiences. Nevertheless, I was studious in maintaining the separation of my own views and values from my research.

While my time in South Africa was limited, I had the opportunity to know and explore various cultures. Unfortunately, I did not learn any local languages to a conversational level. I do believe though- based on my data analysis- that participants were candid, thorough, and clear in relating their experiences.

A potential discomfort may have arisen during the interview process. Three women were interviewed in the later part of data collection. At that point, interviews were conducted in a quiet room at the Student Support Centre section which was intimate in size, which may have caused discomfort for some female participants. In hindsight, a more public space should have been offered as an alternative venue.

My research was greatly aided by the Student Support section at TSiBA, who allowed me to engage with day-to-day operations. I was entrusted with a number of responsibilities, and working in the TSiBA community, I did develop an affinity for the TSiBA Way, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

#### **4.6.2 Reflexivity as a student**

In this research process, I first learned how much I did not know about conducting research. I am, admittedly, a novice in this regard. In conducting this research, I have gained a significantly better understanding of every aspect of this process.

I was also introduced to an excellent tool in managing data. The ATLAS.ti programme streamlined my efforts at organising, sorting, and analysing data.

I have benefitted greatly from the guidance of my supervisor, Professor Tony Naidoo, who often helped me to grasp and apply concepts that were new and not immediately clear to me. I was also fortunate enough to enjoy the various resources furnished by Stellenbosch University, which contributed to my efficacy and efforts as a researcher.

Finally, this study would not have been possible without the willingness and openness of the TSiBA students, as well as the guidance and support of TSiBA faculty and leadership. I was graciously welcomed by this warm, familial community, and gifted with the trust of many of its members. This allowed me to better observe and understand how TSiBA functions, and how TSiBA succeeds.



### **4.6.3 Reflexivity of self**

This research stemmed from a desire to understand why some succeed under seemingly similar circumstances to others that are overwhelmed by challenges that arise. My personal background- as a Black, same-gender-loving, American man- and the totality of my experience has certainly shaped my worldview. Being a member of not one, but two communities that have experienced systemic and social repression has allowed me to observe and analyse the impact of said repression from a personal perspective and a broader view. I have witnessed- both intimately, and more removed- people that have enjoyed ostensibly similar opportunities and challenges, while experiencing vastly variant outcomes. What these juxtapositions indicated to me was a vague confluence of experience and personal factors driving resilience, and I felt it imperative to examine this process.

I understood well before commencing with this research that it is impossible to encapsulate the nuances and intangible traits that constitute an individual. However, despite these potential shortcomings, I believed wholeheartedly that this research could help me to contribute to a greater understanding of the phenomenon of resilience- and how to foster it by delving into the experiences of those living it.

## **4.7 Chapter summary**

This chapter provided a comprehensive description of the research methodology and processes employed in completing this study. The research design, motivations for this study, and the procedures for implementing and analysing the research were presented. This chapter explored the data collection and analysis. The

chapter concluded with reflexivity about my own subjective position as researcher with my own subjective lens in the research process and experience

In the next chapter, the findings of this study will be presented. Themes identified in data analysis are outlined, and summaries of the each participant's respective interview are presented.

## **CHAPTER 5**

## **FINDINGS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter will present the findings of this study. Themes and subthemes of the various factors identified during the data analysis process are outlined and discussed. These themes were interwoven through some- and in some cases, all- of the participant narratives, manifesting uniquely, and contributing positively or negatively toward their respective life experiences, with specific consideration of educational goals.

### **5.2 Participant summaries**

In this section, summaries of each interview conducted for this study are first presented, to provide a contextual framework for the participants and their respective narratives. It should be noted that student participants for this study have been assigned aliases to ensure identity confidentiality.

#### **5.2.1 Aaron**

Aaron is a 33-year-old international third-year student. He comes from a rural area of the Congo, with little infrastructure or access to services. He never knew his biological father. His mother did take a new husband, but they never established a father-son relationship. Aaron has six siblings. While he loves his mother, and respects his stepfather, he feels that their choices in having seven children, without the means to support them, were irresponsible. He understands though that these choices were simply reflective of their culture, which promotes large families.

Driven from his native Congo by continued warfare, he and his family became dispersed. Aaron has been separated from his family for many years now, with only very limited contact with his mother and sister.

Before coming to South Africa as an asylum-seeker, he spent eight years in a Zambian refugee camp. At the direction of a sponsor he met while in Zambia, he departed for South Africa, enduring a numerous and often dangerous obstacles to finally reach Cape Town. After arriving, he encountered additional challenges, including lodging, before establishing his asylum status with the South African Department of State. Concurrently, Aaron worked to learn English while trying to secure lodging, with intermittent assistance from his sponsor. He points to his ambitions and goals as motivation for continuing his education. Particularly, he is dedicated to improving the lives of the struggling, so much so that he still works to finance a computer-training centre that he built through microfinance in Zambia. He remains committed to community development and sees that as a definite part of his future.

### **5.2.2 Brian**

Brian is a 27-year-old third-year student, who comes from a rural area of South Africa. He indicates that he was always a fairly strong student. There was however one aberrant year, when he sought to attend a school away from home, in a better-resourced area with a much different socioeconomic makeup. Against his father's admonitions, he accepted his older brother's financial support, and went to board 55 kilometres from his home. He experienced social isolation, language barriers, and

racially-motivated bullying. Not surprisingly, he failed that year. He returned to his hometown school, and quickly resumed with academic success.

At home, his family- while not always able to provide financially for his education- has always been engaged. He describes his father as the decision-maker and the disciplinarian. Conversely, his mother was a source of comfort and nurturing. He has three brothers and one sister, including his older brother, whom he identifies as a constant source of support and encouragement.

After matriculating, Brian worked in a number of positions in banks and offices. He decided that he would return to school full time. He started at TSiBA, and shortly thereafter encountered a number of financial issues. He was forced to sell his belongings to cover his lodging and food. After all of this, he went home, and his older brother intervened financially, so that Brian could continue his education. He is driven by his own entrepreneurial goals, as well as an affinity for knowledge and achieving greater understanding of the world.

### **5.2.3 Charles**

Charles is a 20-year-old second-year student who comes from a supportive, but somewhat unconventional family in a Cape Town suburb. His grandparents act as his primary familial unit, while he maintains relationships with his mother and father, and their respective new families. His grandmother served as the disciplinary force in his studies, and his grandfather stood as a model of the value of hard work, running his own market and providing for his family, despite not completing formal education.

His father is a source of encouragement and financial support in his academic career, always making a priority of Charles's educational needs. He has always been conscious of the people with whom he surrounds himself. He recalls readily identifying his more troublesome peers and making an effort to avoid them.

While he was able to make supportive friends, Charles did endure instances of bullying. Sometimes the targets of this bullying were superficial. Sometimes, they were much more hurtful, such as when schoolteachers informed his classmates that his mother was battling breast cancer. Instead of receiving the support he expected from his peers for something so difficult, his mother's illness became another target for their taunting.

Charles presents as a Christian staunch in faith, which he believes not only motivates him to persist through difficult times, but also provides a sense of grounding for him in his day-to-day experiences.

#### **5.2.4 Derek**

Derek is a 24-year-old third-year student, and a leader to many of his peers who look to him for his honest and unabashed viewpoint. His reserved demeanor is an outward reflection of his thoughtful and analytical nature. Derek was raised in a locale that struggles with the problem gangsterism. Despite this backdrop, he tells of a relatively peaceful childhood, with his mother and grandmother. When his mother passed away, he went to live with his godmother, a trusted friend of his mother who was raising several other foster children. They struggled greatly, with lodging and

general finance. Derek recalls living in a shack behind a house. At times, they would be swamped with waste from the main house due to persistent plumbing problems.

Derek was never close with his father, though he does wish that his father would give greater effort in their relationship. He notes that he generally does not keep many friends. While he mentions some camaraderie with his foster family, he indicates that he generally feels disconnected from other people, even his fellow students.

Derek expresses a genuine affinity for learning, though his overall educational experience was mixed. He cites how some teachers inspired him with their energy and passion, particularly in his study of English literature. Conversely, other teachers diminished his enthusiasm for the classroom. Derek finds motivation in his godmother, who encourages him to keep pursuing his education, despite various academic and financial struggles, and in his personal ambition to be a business leader in South Africa.

### **5.2.5 Edwin**

Edwin is a 24-year-old third-year student, and the son of activist parents. He reveres the roles his parents play in their local community and carries forward their spirit of service in his everyday life. He organises and supports various community events, working to feed those with no food, and relishing the opportunity to stand as a role model in his community. He is particularly proud to be a role model for his younger brother. Edwin reflects often on his role in the world, and how he can make

himself and those around him successful. He is engaging, and sees new people as an opportunity to grow, learn, and connect.

Edwin comes from a community that is tightknit, but faces many challenges, including substance abuse and gangsterism. At home, he enjoys strong relationships with his mother and brother. His relationship with his father is difficult, and significant conflicts have arisen between them. His father is at times physically abusive to his mother, who is also coping with personal health challenges. Edwin's conflicts with his father have persisted. Most recently, his father took out an interdict against him- rendering him effectively homeless- after he used physical force to protect his mother from additional physical abuse. Through this, Edwin has persisted with his educational pursuits and his commitment to his community, and he refuses to abandon his goals.

#### **5.2.6 Felicia**

Felicia is a 26-year-old third-year student. She comes from a strict Muslim home, where her father maintained a very disciplined household. While this has caused her stress at times, she and her sister have always found solace and support in each other. This connection continued into the schoolyard, where she and her sister were bullied at times, for various reasons. Felicia and her sister are still close, though they live in different households, working to build their own respective families. Felicia's relationships and interactions with her family are typically close and loving. She also views her cousins as immediate family, particularly her age peers. She notes that her family has become less connected as she has grown. For various reasons-



ranging from relocation to minor family conflicts- the large familial structure she once knew has drifted.

Felicia identifies greatly with her faith. Growing up in a strict and observant household, she was generally insulated from the negative elements of her community, such as drug houses and gangs on the street. She carries her faith and its tenets with her, and they often guide her decisions

In school, she kept to Muslim girlfriends. Such a group was most comfortable, with shared experiences and cultural connections. This cohort of young women supported and motivated one another toward personal and academic success.

Felicia reports that, during her formative years, her father was not personally engaged her studies or supportive of her efforts, which at times has caused her distress. Though she now lives with her husband, her father has recently taken a greater interest in her academics, and her person, for which she is thankful.

### **5.2.7 Gerald**

Gerald is a 23-year-old third-year student, who describes most of his upbringing as insulated. His family relocated frequently in his younger years, as his father's work opportunities demanded. Eventually, the family settled in a complex with only a few neighbours. As the family struggled to lay roots, and eventually settled in a secluded neighborhood, he enjoyed only limited socialisation. Conversely, he was also insulated from the problems of the broader community. He describes his familial interactions as reserved, noting that they generally keep to themselves. Gerald recognises this trait in himself, and is working to move past it, and be more outgoing.

He feels that his parents could have pushed him more in his studies and general ambitions, and been more engaging overall. He describes his relationship with his extended family as diminished since childhood, when the family at large was a more tightknit unit. He attributes this drift to time, and familial ageing, but also recognises financial stressors as a significant contributing factor.

Gerald acknowledges his friendships throughout his experience, but feels he has had only one *solid* friend, with whom he remains close. He describes his overall educational career through matric as mediocre, noting that he rarely pushed himself to succeed. He experienced some bullying in high school but was able to deflect or dismiss the experiences. He spent some time away from school after matriculating, but eventually found his interest piqued by TSiBA, where he reengaged with his education. He describes his girlfriend, a fellow student and top performer, as a great motivation. Her presence motivates him through times when his efforts wane.

### **5.2.8 Helen**

Helen is a 21-year-old third-year student. She was raised in part by her father's mother, after the separation of her parents. She then moved to live with her mother at age 13. During her earlier years, she recalls gunshots as common background noise. Her home early on was a place where violence, alcoholism, and drug use were common. She describes her mother's home as quiet, though the town is not a place where she envisions building her life. As a child, she had a strong relationship with her grandmother, to whose discipline and diligence as a teacher she attributes her fluent English, and overall academic success. While she has a loving relationship with

her mother, she recognises emotional barriers to their communication. Her father is passed on, and her relationship with her stepfather is strained, greatly due to his treatment of her mother. She has a strong relationship with her brothers, who look up to her, and her cousins, whom she considers social peers.

With her family an eight-hour bus ride away, Helen is on her own in Cape Town. She now lives with a group of other young women. These adjustments often wear on her, as she longs for the familiarity of home, and the closeness of family. She excels academically, and views herself as a rising role model, for her brothers and for her community.

### **5.2.9 Iris**

Iris is a 20-year-old third year student. Even as a child, she was cognisant of the prevalent pitfalls of alcohol, drugs, and risky sexual behavior in her community. She recognises that many young people in her area chose to engage these activities, and credits her positive choices to a strong and engaged family, community role models, and regular involvement with her church. She also points to her choices in friends, guided by her upbringing, as positive influences. She describes her friends as being motivated, like her, and benefitting from their shared energies and aspirations.

Iris initially began her higher education at another institution. Due to financial challenges that arose, she was forced to withdraw from study. TSiBA offered her an opportunity to continue her education, and she chose to pursue her education. She has come to Cape Town on her own, and rarely sees her family, who live in Soweto. She intends to finish her degree, and complete studies beyond TSiBA as well.

### 5.2.10 Jessica

Jessica is a 21-year-old third-year student. She comes from Gauteng Province. She acknowledges that there were negative elements in her home area, but these play a very small role in her story. With a strong foundation of family and faith, Jessica resolved from a young age to not be deterred or negatively-influenced by the troubled world around her. This even applies to extended family, many of whom casted doubt that she could care for herself, let alone further her education. She gives a lot of credit to mentors in her community, but also to her father, for always valuing, encouraging, and providing for education. She credits her mother with fostering her faith and involvement in the church, which for her was a place of both spiritual and social growth, as well as a protective layer for a troubled community.

While always a strong student, Jessica was unable to secure the financial support needed to attend university. She was directed to the TSIBA- Eden campus by a mentor. Despite her apprehension with regard to pursuing a business degree, she enrolled. She quickly acclimated and flourishd in the TSIBA environment. She opted to leave home to complete her undergraduate studies at the Cape Town campus, where she could pursue her education beyond certification. While missing home, she quickly found a community of faith peers at TSIBA, and they support and promote each other in studies and life.

### 5.3 Identification of themes

Whether related to challenges or supports, five overarching themes were identified from analysis of the data provided in participant interviews. These are financial resources, interpersonal relationships, experiences of the school environment, community-level elements, and personality traits of the participants.

Through analysis of the interview data for risk factors and adverse conditions for the participants, the following themes were identified: financial limitations, interpersonal challenges, negative experiences of the educational environment, challenges in the local community, and counterproductive personal traits.

The risk and support factors embedded throughout participant experiences are tied to: financial resources, interpersonal relationships, experiences of the school environ, experiences of the local community, and personal traits of the participants.

These overarching themes are presented in Figure 3.

	<b>Financial resources</b>	<b>Interpersonal relationships</b>	<b>Experiences of the school environ</b>	<b>Experiences of community</b>	<b>Personal traits</b>
<b>Subthemes of adversity</b>	<b>Limited household resources</b>	<b>Poor peer influences</b>	<b>Bullying/racism</b>	<b>Criminality and violence</b>	<b>Aggression</b>
	<b>Limited personal resources</b>	<b>Familial discord</b>	<b>Language barriers</b>	<b>Prevalence of substance abuse</b>	<b>Lack of discipline</b>
			<b>Poor teacher engagement</b>	<b>Lack of guidance</b>	
<b>Subthemes of resilience</b>	<b>Financial stability</b>	<b>Beneficial peer groupings</b>	<b>Engaged teaching</b>	<b>Faith community</b>	<b>Ambition</b>
	<b>Sponsorship</b>	<b>Financial resources</b>	<b>Healthy peer engagement</b>	<b>Mentorship</b>	<b>Discipline</b>
		<b>Strong family ties</b>		<b>Sponsorship</b>	<b>Good judgement</b>
					<b>Spirituality</b>

*Figure 3: Themes and subthemes identified through data analysis*

## 5.4 The manifestations of struggle

There are many challenges that- individually or cumulatively- can obstruct an individual's path to education and career achievement. This section will explore how these varying themes of adversity are woven into the narratives of the study participants.

### 5.4.1 The overarching and underlying problem of money

Throughout the participant interviews, the impact of financial resources was undeniably salient and ever-present. Some participants' pursuits of educational opportunities and academic goals were affected significantly by instances and conditions of financial limitations and hardships.

#### *5.4.1.1 Financial limitations in the home*

Certain participants in this study noted that their parents- for reasons ranging from illness to lack of forethought and preparation- were not able to provide the resources necessary for them to flourish academically. In each of these instances, this inadequate resourcing manifested as struggling or failing to cover the various costs tied to engaging with educational opportunities. These limitations also contributed to other potentially destabilising and counterproductive outcomes, from multiple relocations to virtual homelessness.

With unemployment rates exceeding 25% (SSA, 2018), and low wages a perpetual condition for many workers (Armstrong, 2009), many students in higher education will continue to emerge from low-resourced backgrounds, with little or no financial means within their families to manage the associated costs. Given these challenges, and the stressors that often accompany the lack of financial resources, students will understandably be more susceptible to attrition in their studies (Nduna & Jewkes, 2012).

Aaron laments that his parents were unable to provide the resources necessary for him to thrive: “...*they did not plan, they did not prepare for my journey.*”

Derek describes his godmother’s valiant efforts to forestall the family’s financial crisis: “*It’s because we didn’t have money, so my godmother sold her house, so she could free up some cash, and we rented a house down the road from where I stay now. Because she has a business of her own, and she had big debts that she had to pay, and things like that. That little pool of cash eventually dried up, and we got kicked out of our house there.*”

Edwin’s comments describe the tenuous living conditions where he called home: “...*we moved around a lot, because we never had a place of our own, so we stayed either by renting or we stayed by family. Basically I’ll say home is where the heart was. That was home. We didn’t have a physical room of our own. I stayed with my grandmother, my mom’s mother, and I would only see my father on weekends, like now and then.*”

Gerald describes his family’s frequent relocations: “*When I was young, I moved around. I grew up mainly in the northern suburbs... and then we moved in with my grandparents... And I think a couple of years after that, we*



*moved to Wynberg, in the Southern Suburbs where my father works, and because he works there, we live there.”*

Embedded in these narratives are experiences of dislocation and instability linked to financial hardship.

#### *5.4.1.2 The under-resourced community*

As South Africa strives and struggles to expand access for various services and infrastructures for its people, many communities contend with a cycle of poverty and a perpetual lack of economic opportunity and resources. Generations of precarious conditions and systemic deprivation have contributed to high rates of substance abuse and criminality in many of these communities (Collings et al., 2013). These challenges often exert a deleterious impact on the ability of those living in those locales to flourish.

Several participants described the various harsh elements impacting their respective home communities:

Here Aaron acknowledges a severe lack of resources facing his home community: *“Life [at home] is very very bad. I’m sad to know that people don’t have opportunity for education, for sanitation; when I talk about sanitation, I’m talking about clean water, clinics. There are infrastructures put into place, but they are a bit abandoned.”*

Charles' home area faces a multitude of financial and social challenges: *"It's seen as a rural community, with its crime and poverty and drugs that are happening over there."*

Derek acknowledges living in areas in which he often had to contend with unique and detrimental conditions: *"Yea, so it's just the two of us in the one-bedroom apartment...where they shoot and try and kill each other so often. You know what, if I look at it in hindsight, I actually didn't have such an ok childhood. It's actually quite strange, because while growing up, you never tell yourself 'This is not normal, this is not how it's supposed to be, this is uncool'."*

Edwin experienced overcrowded classrooms and the impacts of gangsterism in and around the school building: *"Well, you know growing up with school it was- we had a lot of children in class. We had fifty children in class. A lot of adversity, meaning gangsterism and things happening around there. So it impacted the institution. We couldn't come in some days because of shooting. And then they were worried, if we were going to go there, then you come late to school. So this affected the syllabus, the progress, not finishing the module."*

Helen lived in an area that struggled with high rates of crime and violence: *"Jo'burg was all about a lot of shooting. I remember growing up, at a very young age,*

*I would hear gunshots- because I grew up in Hillbrow, the town of Hillbrow. So, there were a lot of cops all the time, and it was just-you know I didn't understand at the time. I knew that it wasn't the best of places."*

Iris laments generational substance abuse in her neighbourhood: *"Like committees in townships, we find teenagers that are involved in drugs, and things like that. Alcohol. And they're unable to just continue with their studies. Things like that. And I think also this is from- because they kind of don't have supervision. So, it's just a trend that continues. It comes from their parents. They've been doing that, and the kid is lost for it. It's like a trend that continues. So, yea, I grew up in that kind of environment."*

Jessica's home area also struggled with criminality and substance abuse: *"...we also have gangsters, crooks who are always fighting, for drugs or alcohol, or stuff like that."*

As these examples demonstrate, there is a variety of pitfalls permeating some communities in South Africa. These challenges impact the day-to-day and overall experiences of individuals in various ways, and may serve to hinder the achievement of the students that emerge from these communities.

#### **5.4.2 Family as a point of contention and loss**

Many elements- at home and beyond- may prove detrimental to the family. The loss or departure of loved ones- particularly those in parental or caregiver roles- may weigh heavily on those left behind. Emotional and financial distress alike may follow, and these stressors can weigh heavily on familial obligations and interactions, facilitating conflict and turmoil for the family (Nduna & Jewkes, 2012). Such conditions in this primary point of support and socialisation may cause significant distraction from course study, resulting in less-than-optimal outcomes.

Aaron never knew his real father and lost his stepfather to civil war, ultimately driving him from his homeland: *“...basically, I come from a family where I don’t know my exact father, apart from the one who was presented to me. So I don’t really know my real father. That’s why it was very difficult for me to grow up with a great education, and all this stuff... I first left after we were attacked at home and when my [step]father was killed, I fled to Zambia.”*

Charles was raised by his grandparents, as his parents could not manage the responsibility of his care: *“It was like a big long story, but I grew up in the home of my grandparents. I didn’t have both mother and father since birth until now.”*

Derek’s adoptive family was broken up due to his godmother’s illness and inability to provide for them: *“So, our family split up, and everybody went back to their biological families, which was very tough for us, because we made it through a lot together, and the fact that we had to split up was just really uncool.”*

Edwin saw little of his father while living with his mother's family. He also experienced contention with his mother's family: *"We didn't have a physical room of our own. I stayed with my grandmother, my mom's mother, and I would only see my father on weekends, like now and then. So basically it was like, whenever he did come, it was quarrels, like arguments, a lot of fighting going on. And we had to take a lot of things from people, because you know, when you stay at other people's houses, you can't just watch tv when you want to, you have to take a lot of things from people, put it like that."*

Felicia's family drifted in part due to her grandparents demanding and restrictive manners, which her father would later mirror: *"I would say there is a reason why the family kind of grew apart, and I think it all started with my grandparents... they want to tell you 'This is how you must live your life. That's what you must do. Don't go into that career because of so and so. Don't do this, don't do any of that' ...So we knew that we were unhappy about certain things, and we knew we couldn't voice our opinions to our parents, especially to my father. To him it was, if he said it, that's it. No questions asked. So we kind of grew up I think in high school also very unhappy. But we never voiced anything."*

Gerald's family struggled with communication: *"My family, they stay more to themselves. I think I'm the one that recognised that I'm similar in that regard, and I've tried to push myself out of it."*

Helen's family did not provide a home environment conducive to study: *"My house, [was] not the best place, because I stay at home, I [didn't] want to stay in the hostel. And the weekend, it was just not the best time to study, because my parents were drinking often, so it wasn't ideal to be at home. I never wanted to be at home...If I tried to study and there was noise, I would rather leave, and then study in the car. So, yea, I will say it was a negative."* (Helen)

Iris' family did not communicate in an expressive or effective manner: *"Black families, we don't express ourselves with each other. We don't talk the deep talks and stuff."* (Iris)

### **5.4.3 Negative experiences of the learning space**

The quality of the experience of the educational environment is essential to the success of the learner. When adversity arises for students in this space, students may experience greater difficulty in learning. A lack of resources in school can leave students underprepared for future academic pursuits (Gorski, 2013), while struggles adapting to and socialising in the school environ can render it a hostile environment for the student, who may disengage with curricula, or with attendance altogether.

#### 5.4.3.1 Peer challenges

Conflicts between students can create a hostile experience of the school setting. Positive peer interactions can contribute to resilience (Wright & Masten, 2015), struggles to socialisation can be detrimental to the educational process and experience for the individual. Bullying and fighting can be overwhelming, pulling the student's attention away from study as they cope with these stressors.

Derek experienced social, familial, and financial struggles during high school that often hampered his experience of learning: *“Yea so I really hated high school...I just absolutely hated high school. It was a very tough time for me. My mother passed away while I was in high school. I failed first year, grade 10 when I was in high school. I didn't play any sports in high school because I just didn't have the resources, the money... So high school wasn't a pretty nice place for me, from a peer point of view.”*

Several participants noted enduring bullying as students, and that these experiences negatively impacted their respective educational experiences:

*“So, I was made fun of a lot at school, and that caused me to...you know what I mean, always used to push back when people pushed me. And then one year, one of my class teachers announced to the class without me being there that my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, which she was. She told the class, and it's not something that I would have by choice told anybody, because I know that people would obviously make fun of me. And it was a very big issue,*

*because a lot of people, I thought would be good friends, be there, supportive. They actually made fun of it, and thought it was ok, which made me not easily trust people thereafter.” (Edwin)*

*“I wasn’t a bully in school, definitely not...but when there were people that wanted to do something to [my sister], she’d come to me, and I’d stand up for her. That’s how we were in school. Like I said, we had our unhappy days and whatever.” (Felicia)*

*“But in high school, high school was tough. It was tough, especially with the guys calling me names, pushing me around, (mimics shoving) like that. I had one incident where a guy smacked my face, and I couldn’t do anything about it, because I didn’t want to react. So things like that, high school was a bit tough.” (Gerald)*

*“I was the kid that people picked on a lot. I don’t know why, I was just that kid.” (Helen)*

#### *5.4.3.2 Racial and cultural obstacles*

While South Africa now enjoys a democratically-elected government, cultural differences and biases still play an intrinsic role in the lives of all South Africans. As the broader population has not enjoyed significant widespread increases in wealth under the modern government, higher-quality resources- including academic resources- continue to be most enjoyed by white South Africans (Lemon & Battersby-Lennard, 2009).



In engaging with opportunities to access these schools, students from less-resourced backgrounds often must depart their home communities and enter into cultural and socioeconomic spaces vastly different from what they know. These engagements may result in negative experiences, including language struggles and racial taunting, resulting in personal distress and social isolation for the learner. Conditions of distress and isolation run counter to concepts of wellness and relatedness (Ryan, 2009; “The PERMA Model, 2017), and can be deleterious to the students experience of the educational experience.

Brian tells of the racial bullying he faced when studying in a new and more racially diverse school: *“Yea, remember, I was coming from an all-black school, and I was going to a white, coloured, mixed school. So, ok firstly, I think most whites, they did not accept me, so I was getting racial abuse every time, and sometimes I would not feel to go to school. I would dodge school without telling anyone. The racial abuse was way way way too extreme.”*

Charles sometimes retaliated aggressively in response to instances of bullying: *“I used to get into a lot of trouble though, because I had a bit of a temper, because I couldn’t say ‘r’. I couldn’t say [rolled r], I said [r without roll]...and kids, you know kids, when they’re younger, they’re very cruel. They’re very, I don’t know, the opposite of softhearted. So I was made fun of a lot at school.”*

Helen struggled to learn Afrikaans when introduced to a new school setting:

*“So I had to go to a little school...It was Afrikaans only, and I did not know Afrikaans at all. So it was kind of hard, because when I got there, everyone just spoke Afrikaans, you know? They hardly ever spoke English.”*

#### **5.4.4 Counterproductive personal traits**

At times, an individual may exhibit traits that are not conducive to achieving their respective academic goals. Desires for socialisation with and validation from less driven peers can contribute to dereliction of study, or even delinquent behaviour (Young & Weerman, 2013). These challenges serve to distract the student, as her/his intrinsic motivations toward academic goals may be outweighed by extrinsic motivations for social approval and companionship (Ryan, 2009). Similarly, emotional struggles may prove overwhelming distractions for a student (Kirk, 2002).

Brian speaks of the negative influences his peers sometimes had on his behaviour as he sought social popularity: *“...in the streets, you probably go for some girls, hang around on the corner, having a chat with other guys you know. Yea probably some drinking (laugh), and some smoking. The influence, yea at the time, the influence at the time, I would say, yea at some point I did...I was kind of wanting to be looked at as a cool guy, with that respect of hanging out with guys, go late at night.”*

As a young person, Derek struggled to process his experiences and emotions. As an adult, he struggles to build friendships with peers: *“I think when I was younger, I didn’t really want to deal with emotional things. I was always just trying to live, and*

*go on. Whatever happened, or whatever didn't happen in my life, I'd just say Ok, it's done with, and just move on from there. [As an adult] I find that people don't understand themselves a lot, as I have had the... as I was forced to when I was younger. So that definitely makes it different to have friendships and so on, because I know now that I'm not the same. I'm not on the same level as most other people that I interact with. I wouldn't say that I have a lot of friends, because to be honest, I just don't think that I've found that."*

For some participants, struggles with anger and emotional management served to create new obstacles:

*"I can't say that I having a coping mechanism. I've got anger...Ok it was my problem-why I'm trying to find a coping mechanism- is that I fear to open up to people, because I'm afraid that people will throw it back in your face."*

*(Edwin)*

Helen struggled to manage her anger in certain situations, and would fight in response:

*"My friends would get in trouble with stupid things, then I would get in trouble for them. I also liked fighting- like physically fighting- a lot. So, if I got really pissed, I would turn to it. Because I couldn't assert myself, you know?" (Helen)*

## 5.5 Fueling resilience

While conflict and challenge are inevitable, people sometimes enjoy certain positive elements in their respective experiences that can serve to mitigate the negative impact of circumstances and conditions that arise- or even those that are ever-present.

### 5.5.1 Success starts at home

For most learners to progress and achieve, parental engagement and support are essential. High parental expectations and support broaden the realm of possibility for the student (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). As obstacles impede the educational path, a parent's efficacy in providing guidance, direction, and emotional support contributes to the student's ability to manage such obstacles, while remaining focused on academic goals (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010).

Some participants enjoyed the benefit of family committed to their academic endeavours:

*"[My father] took off from work, to get me to hand in my application form, for here, for university. He had me standing in the lines, he stood there with me, he bought me snacks, water, the works. We went for walks, where we just spoke about career decisions and things I wanted to do; which university I feel I wanted to go to...and I think he's really impacted my life a lot." (Charles)*

*"I still say Grandma, rest in peace. Wherever she is, she is the one. I am the person I am today because of her. The English I speak, it's because of her. Because she made sure that each and every day, I would sit- there was the*

*lounge, and there was the kitchen. I would sit by the kitchen, on the tiled floor. It's cold, and I had to read. I had to do my sums, and I had to finish."* (Helen)

*"The first people who made a positive impact in my life, I think it's my parents. They were always there for me, and they would push me to go to school. Even in my gap year, they made sure that the next year I go back to school and get a lot. So I think they really made a good impact in my life, just being there for me, and also telling me what the purpose of studying is...And my dad, my dad is so passionate about people who are at school, that you do everything for school...He is passionate about us going to that school, and getting that education that he didn't get. So, he's kind of like- the most person who's been supporting us."* (Jessica)

For other participants, family contributed positively in other ways that ultimately contributed to their respective academic achievement.

Brian received emotional support and nurturing from his mother:

*"In terms of supporting now, who are you going to cry at, that was my mother."*

Felicia's immediate and extended family members helped to buoy one another through financial struggles:

*"My family's the type- they look out for each other. The one sibling's children- if the one sibling is struggling financially, the other sibling would come and they'd buy the kids clothing, or they would give food. Things like that. We just*

*help each other out. That's the type of family we are, and there would be the- we'd have, maybe once a month, a get-together. It would just be us, cousins and siblings. Everyone just maybe brings something, or you make your own food and we all bring it together. But that's just how we were, very close-knit family."*

### **5.5.2 Peer supports**

Age peers may have impactful interactions. These relationships may be intimate, with peers functioning as a chosen family. Age peers contribute to one another's development and understanding of the world at large. When friends share goals and ambitions, they can serve to keep one another focused through challenges as they arise. These supportive interactions can help to foster the resilience of friend group members (Wright & Masten, 2015).

Charles has been able to rely on a close circle of friends that provide motivation and support, allowing him to direct his efforts to his academic goals:

*"I have a group of friends that I call my best friends, or whatever. They help me, they motivate you know. There's things that always come up, and they tell me 'Look, don't really worry about this now. Why don't you just focus on this and that and if you need any support, we're here for you'."*

Felicia draws motivation from a small group of long-time friends with similar motivations and ambitions:

*“Well the friends I’ve got, I had about- there’s three friends I’ve had since- like the one friend, I’m friends for about ten years now. Ten or eleven years. Funny thing is, we were very close then. We met in primary school, and between then and now, we were [very close] the nice thing about it was all of us wanted to achieve something. So, because we all have that mindset, if I say I want to become this. I want to go study there, then it would motivate the next friend, and the friend would also say, I’m also going to do something. You don’t want to study alone, and then you feel like, I’m doing nothing, and she’s studying. So in that way, we motivated each other.”*

Helen counts her cousins among her best friends, and leans on them for emotional support:

*“My cousins are my world, I love them to bits... Yes they play a major role, because they’ve always been there. They’re always there for me. Every time I need a shoulder to cry on, I think ‘My cousins will be there’.”*

Iris has always enjoyed a close-knit circle of friends:

*“I can say I’ve been really blessed to have quite good friends in my entire life, and from primary school to high school, to right now, I think I have really kept my friends that I have now at varsity.” (Iris)*

Jessica keeps a close group of friends at TSiBA that share in her faith and her ambitions, and support one another through difficult circumstances. This connectedness and source of motivation has contributed greatly to her academic success:

*“My friends right now, we met when we started here, our first year, and luckily, we were all going to church. And I think we clicked because we all have same goals, same vision, and it’s quite an easy road for us, together. It makes us easy to be there for each other, motivate each other, and when one is down we are there for her.”*

### **5.5.3 Sponsorship**

One of the greatest barriers to educational opportunity and academic achievement is access to funding, not only for direct institutional costs, but also for basic necessities, such as food, lodging, and transportation. With general unemployment pushing over 27% (SSA, 2018) and low wages a common condition (Armstrong, 2009), issues of finance are overarching concerns for many aspiring collegiate students. Such concerns are often deleterious to academic goals, and when students are able to experience relief from any of these worries, it allows them to more readily focus on their studies and be better-prepared to pursue and achieve their respective academic goals.

Financial supports allow students to engage with educational opportunities, and to feel more assured that they can focus on their academics without succumbing to



outside demands. Sponsors may also provide guidance and direction for students, allowing them to access resources of which they may have little or no knowledge.

Aaron was able to pursue his academic goals after receiving financial support from a former employer:

*“...the first doctor that I met, I met him by going to his place, and arranging the bricks in his yard. And then he said, ‘I can sponsor you for your school’.”*

Brian’s brother absorbed the costs related to his study, allowing him to engage educational opportunities that may have otherwise been prohibitively expensive:

*“The school was expensive. My father truly was not keen for me to go there. But at the time, my older brother, he was working, so he was willing to pay for that.”*

Helen received financial support that allowed her to access a well-resourced school:

*“So she actually gathered sponsors over there, couples or people that would sponsor a certain child, so they’ll be awarded to you as your godparent. So they actually came and they interviewed me, and they liked me a lot. From there on, they took me to the best school in Plett.”*

#### **5.5.4 Community-level supports**

The communities with which one engages can yield significant positive impact. Caring, engaged communities can function as a buffer or barrier between an individual and more negative local elements, simultaneously helping the individual to learn, grow, and flourish (Tronto, 2010). A cohesive community with a strong sense of collective responsibility and engagement can foster the potential of its members. Though a community may struggle to meet certain needs, the commitment of the members of a community to one another can manifest in a variety of pooled local resources which contribute to positive outcomes (Lazarus et al., 2017). Such engagement and experiences of the local community can foster a sense of relatedness and safety and promote enhanced socialisation. Conditions of security, stability, and connectedness are essential to positive academic engagement and outcomes (Henderson, 2013; Ryan, 2009).

NGOs can also yield such an impact, bringing services, resources, and knowledge capital to underserved communities, thus allowing for greater opportunity and achievement.

Aaron received financial support and guidance through a NGO that allowed him to resettle in South Africa and pursue higher education:

*"I got to South Africa through...a volunteer in Zambia, while I was a refugee in Zambia. She worked through the organisation called Facilitating Opportunity for Refugee Growth and Empowerment... I had to call her from the street just to explain to her how my situation was... And then she suggested that I should come to South Africa, where there are open opportunities, and*

*there is a school that offers scholarships, and she would be helping me while I am studying”*

Charles noted people from his home area that have achieved success and are contributing positively to the community and its development:

*“There are quite a few people that have become successful within the community... and there’s a lot of people that are giving back. There’s recently a guy who started his own chess club at the library, I think he’s an architect. He’s recently opened a chess club for kids that are good at chess, so they can now compete as well, and they can do a lot of other things, and meet people they can network. So it’s not just a bad community. There’s a lot of good things to it as well.”*

For some participants, engagement with a faith community proved beneficial, providing guidance and support, while also insulating them from negative influences at work in the broader community:

*“I still think that my mentors, I think, from the church, were the one who actually improved me, quite a lot, through high school, to be able to- because they’re so encouraging, and they’re always there for you.” (Iris)*

*“...it’s also because I was involved in a church. So I was kind of like- protected from a lot of things, from alcohol abuse, from drugs, teenage pregnancy, stuff like that.” (Jessica)*

### **5.5.5 Supports in the school building**

Healthy, supportive relationships and interactions in the school can not only serve to motivate a student to attend and perform but may also serve to establish a safe haven atmosphere for students enduring adversity in other areas of their lives (Kirk, 2002). Engaged educators can foster the ambition, imagination, and energy of a student (Gorski, 2013). Participants in this study pointed to teachers as contributing positively- and significantly- to their enjoyment and appreciate of learning.

The energy and enthusiasm of dedicated teachers may serve to buoy the interest and efforts of students, encouraging them to engage and, ultimately, to achieve:

*“In terms of [aiding my] academic performance, I would say the teachers ...they went out of their way, because at times, after school... they would call it afternoon classes. They would have one-hour sessions, two-hour sessions, to help us with the material we’d done earlier in the day.” (Brian)*

*“She was my English teacher, and we did Shakespeare, and I remember her describing her passion for Shakespeare... she played a song by Bob Marley, No Woman, No Cry. And that was the first time I actually sat down and listened to the lyrics of a song, and that class really changed a lot for me, because it made me realise that sometimes there’s such a lot of noise in our lives that*

*sitting down and actually listening to that noise, there's actually value in that. And that, needless to say made me really excited to go to her classes." (Derek)*

For Charles, the school setting was a place of excitement and joy:

*"School was always exciting and nice. I used to be at school twenty minutes before the school gate opened, because I was one of those kids that was very excited for school."*

### **5.5.6 Individual strengths**

As troubles present themselves, personal strengths may emerge and manifest in ways that diminish such challenging circumstances. While an individual may lack personal or material resources that would benefit their goals, she or he may exhibit positive personal traits in their experiences of and interactions with their respective environments (Masten, 2001). Participants in this study discussed the personal characteristics they felt have propelled them in their academic careers.

Academic achievement came naturally for some participants, due to their respective levels of knowledge, focus, and discipline, and they continue to enjoy the benefits of these traits:

*"School...maybe I was fortunate, because at school, in terms of academic performance, I did not really struggle." (Brian)*

*"I'm a dedicated person, and whatever that I put in my mind, I do it. And also, I'm organised. I don't do my things last minute and everything, I do things*

*now, and I give it all. Not just do it for the sake of doing it, I give it all so that I can pass with grades, with good grades and everything. So I think that has helped me, having passion of what I'm doing now, has made me to be able to do everything and succeed."* (Jessica)

For others, there is an acceptance of obligation and responsibility- in family and community- that motivates them through challenging times:

*"I had a passion that once I studied, I can help the same family that is struggling. And also my community, that I always think about every day, because there are so many people there who need support, but they don't have the support. But through me, if I study, and get through all the education that I want to achieve, I can support them easily."* (Aaron)

*"I think just knowing the fact that there's people that are looking up to you, or are just waiting for you to show them that this thing is possible, I think that's my drive."* (Iris)

*"I'm a very hard worker. I don't believe in giving up. I do not believe in giving up. And the faith that I had, in God, at all times. Nothing is impossible. I think my faith drives me the most. And the mere fact that I know my background. I know where I come from. I know where I want to be. I know that I'm destined for greater things than just settling for what people tell you that you deserve."* (Helen)

Charles acknowledges a strong sense of personal integrity that helped him to resist the more deleterious behaviours of his peers:

*“To be quite honest with you, there were a lot of friends that I’ve left behind me...they wanted me to do things, smoking, selling drugs, all these things, but I knew deep down, those things are not for me. It’s not what I wanted to do. It’s not things that I’ve set out for myself as a person, because I have my own morals, I have my own goals that I’ve set out. I have my own objectives.”*

Derek is driven by his own experiences of financial struggle and seeks to engage with meaningful and beneficial opportunities:

*“So I think I am a rather driven person. I do know what I want. I do know that I don’t want to be poor. I don’t want to suffer the same life as I grew up, to grow old with. Neither do I want the same for my family, for my children. And I think that has really helped me ask myself, What am I doing here? Why am I here? What do I stand to learn from being here? And what do others stand to learn from me being here?”*

Some students exhibit a level of persistence when facing challenges that allows them to achieve their goals and ambitions:

*“...I don’t give up. I don’t see it as what I’m going through is a challenge. I take it on head on. I take it as an opportunity, something to mold me, make me stronger.” (Edwin)*

*“I’ve always been goal-driven. I could set goals for myself, and even though- for whatever reason- I don’t achieve that goal, it doesn’t stop me from setting more goals, if I’m trying to achieve something else.” (Felicia)*

### **5.5.7 The collective benefits of TSIBA study**

The TSIBA model recognises that students may struggle with varying difficulties, and faculty work together to identify these challenges and assist students before they become overwhelmed. The TSIBA model also recognises that its students are capable, competent, whole individuals, and that they should have agency in reaching their potential. Students are challenged not only academically, but they are also pushed to engage with various opportunities for personal development and community service.

From entrepreneurial networking to the pay-it-forward ethos of the institutional programming- which encourages students to engage with local communities and provide tutelage and mentorship- the TSIBA curriculum and community fosters a broad range of personal and professional skills (McFarlane, 2016).

Several participants pointed to the group work aspect of the TSIBA curriculum as helping them greatly in their academic and personal growth and progress:



*“...you see at TSIBA, there is a lot of group work, where you are exposed to work with people; and you just have to work, whether you like it or not, professionally, otherwise, you do not work together, you get zero, or you get bad marks. So you just have to figure out a way, how to work around the person you don't like...But I guess the longer or the more experience you get working with people, I got to figure out ways how to sort of deal with other people, in order to do whatever you needed to do at the time. And probably one thing would be more inward looking. Because at TSIBA, you always do reflections about yourself with regards to TSIBA values. So you always mirror yourself and those values. I guess that, in the long term, it sort of plays in you. It sort of becomes you. Those values become part of your journey, because you always reflect on them, so they stay with you.” (Brian)*

*“Group work is definitely a character- not just character-building, but a character-chiseling exercise throughout TSIBA. Learning how to work with people, not just in a friend-space, but also to work towards a unified goal, trying to lead a group of leaders, which all have an idea how something should be done, has always been interesting. Like I said, TSIBA has always been a place where you learn about concepts and models and theories, but also learn about yourself, and in so doing also learn about other people. And I think you cannot separate the two. TSIBA is an institution of growth, and not just learning.” (Derek)*

The tightknit and intricate network of students and staff has created a comfortable and caring environment, and this is of particular importance to several participants:

*“I will say, what made me persevere, I think, for me, it’s the philosophy of TSiBA. The whole foundation of what they offer here. You know, no other institution- it’s the uniqueness of them, and what they have to offer...they have all these faculties- let’s say mechanisms- in place, to assist you, to develop you.” (Edwin)*

*“...when I started, in the very beginning, the lecturers you had- actually everyone on this campus- they never knew you by a number. So you were known as you. They knew your name. That’s how things were. When you get your results, it’s not your student number and your results. Everything was by name. So things came to- I wouldn’t say a personal level- but because someone knew you that way, rather than just you being a number, that kind of gave you a good feeling.” (Felicia)*

*“...the people, especially the staff. They really helped me, when I asked for help. the way they also explained things, in subjects. For example, if there were concepts I couldn’t understand, they really helped me to understand it. And the more thinking subjects, like management, or leadership, really helped me to really understand myself, in certain aspects, I don’t really look at things in the same way when it comes to leadership. Looking at other people, and myself. And management, looking at things in a business environment, how to see*

*things, in a way that people on top see things. And it was quite nice to sort of get that exposure, and to really grow in that regard. Because with all those things I've actually learned in the subjects, I could actually apply in my own personal life, and make it more personal. It really changed my perception of things, the way I think of how things work in the world." (Gerald)*

*"I would say, the number of students...I'm naturally thinking that if I was at a bigger university, I wasn't going to be as good as I am right now. Because they even have tutors, if there's a subject- finance for instance, financial analysis- you get to have class time, and then the tutorial afterwards, in which the tutor is assigned to help you individually if you have a problem with something...there's a support system for the students. You just go to them, you tell them how you feel. We have a shrink in school. It's good, because sometimes you just need it." (Helen)*

*"I think TSiBA has such a great support system. You're never alone, unless you really want to be alone. Because it's such a small campus, and everything is so intimate. Everyone is just for everyone. So, I think you- I don't know how to explain it. There's so much support... We technically know each any everyone, and you know which one is troubled with what, and stuff like that. So there's always support, so that you get ahead." (Iris)*

Aaron speaks of how he has benefitted from the TSiBA's life skills development programming:

*“TSiBA has got the Profile of Graduateness, whereby in HCBA or in the foundation, in the self-development course, we have what we call the ‘Who Am I?’. It’s where you try to discover in that year... the whole year, it has got five values, in each sphere. The five values help you to understand who you are...I can say that the Profile of Graduateness has impacted me a lot, has helped me a lot, one, to discover myself, to discover my strength, and to make me feel the other person next to me, and feel, irrespective of me being here in South Africa, being away from my family, but I still feel being in the family that cares about me.”*

*(Aaron)*

Mentorship has been key for Charles in his TSiBA experience:

*“Having a mentor has really taught me a lot. The mentor, I must say, to do something so selfless and do something so considerate; to offer up your time, you know... Most of them have their own businesses as well. So for them to offer up their time, sometimes three, four hours a day- the time when they have mentorship- to offer up their time and space sometimes, to open it up to a stranger to guide them, and have their best interests at heart and to help them, I think that’s something that’s really stood out for me at TSiBA, and I think that’s something that not a lot of institutions make available.”*

Jessica acknowledges how attending TSIBA on a scholarship has made her educational pursuits possible, while her adjustment to a new city and school were helped by the introspective elements of TSIBA programming:

*“We do have classes that we call Quiet Time. It’s where we come and just say how you feel. It more about your emotions and dealing with your emotions. I think that it’s helped me, especially when I’m homesick, so much. Yea, when I miss my home, my family. And how they have helped me to do it- because when I got a scholarship here- I got a scholarship from TSIBA, and they supported financially, and I think that’s how [TSIBA has helped me].”*

## 5.6 Conclusion

This chapter detailed the findings derived from the interview data provided by ten students from the TSIBA Cape Town campus. An initial summary of the themes and subthemes identified during the data analysis was presented, followed by summaries of the participant interviews. Themes of adversity and resilience in the participant narratives were outlined and discussed.

In the next chapter, there will be a discussion of the findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5. The limitations for this research will be detailed, followed by recommendations for future research, and for the application of the findings of the study. Finally, the chapter will conclude with the personal reflexivity of the researcher

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

There is a significant body of research related to adversity, trauma, education, and resilience, respectively. This study was conceived and conducted with the goal of building a greater understanding of the supports and resources that help non-traditional students in overcoming impediments to their educational careers. Specifically, in order to achieve this, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with ten students, from varying backgrounds, all in good standing with the Tertiary School in Business Administration (TSiBA) – Cape Town campus.

As the data provided through the interviews was analysed, certain themes weighed heavily- in varying ways- on each participant's respective narrative. Other themes varied from one participant to the next.

#### **6.2 Barriers to educational achievement**

##### **6.2.1 Financial obstacles**

Financial challenges were mentioned most often during interviews as significant impediments to educational pursuits. These challenges manifested at various points in the narratives of each participant, yielding varying impacts that always served to undermine the academic progress and goals of the participants. The impacts of financial struggle may land on any aspect of the student life.

For some, these challenges may have manifested at home, where family may endure significant- or even perpetual- unemployment, forcing members of the

household to either relocate for work opportunities, or subsist on state grants. Those that relocate may find themselves isolated in the absence of family or home culture, even if enjoying some increase in financial comfort. For others, a lack of capital may mean struggling to finance tuition fees or books, or having to choose between paying school fees, and providing for self and family. It may mean having to take on time- and energy-consuming work, which may prove physically and emotionally draining, and distract from academic pursuits. Of course, these conditions may also fuel emotional and relationship strains within the household, to the detriment of familial interaction and engagement (Van Schalkwyk, 2019).

#### **6.2.2. Challenges embedded in the household**

Financial struggles linked to unemployment and familial challenges experienced by the participants often worked to their detriment. These factors contributed to instability in home environment for some participants, with varying impact. Familial relocation in the pursuit of employment presented as a barrier to social engagement for some. Familial challenges such as domestic abuse and familial detachment resulted in stressful living conditions and forced relocation. Both outcomes have the potential to wreak havoc on an individual's psychological well-being, and, consequently, on his/her academic efforts (Henderson, 2013).

#### **6.2.3 A lack of opportunity, real and perceived**

As previously discussed, broader economic challenges facing South Africa have resulted in a variety of obstacles for students seeking to further their academic aims. Opportunities to engage with resources and services to support these goals can be scant or seemingly inaccessible, due to poor local resourcing, or a limited

household understanding of how to access educational infrastructure. At the primary and secondary levels, many resource needs for schools serving low-income students go unmet, with overcrowded classrooms hampering the learner's ability to engage with faculty and curricula (Louw et al., 2011). At the collegiate level, fees are often prohibitive for low-income students, and the cost of university study remains a contentious and divisive point (Pugin, 2016).

### **6.3 A proven approach**

It is well-noted that there is a significant need for reforms in South Africa's educational infrastructure. To varying degrees, and for many different reasons, most developing nations- and even some developed nations- are grappling with similar challenges, demands, and shortfalls. As South Africa continues its progress as a young nation, future growth and stability will hinge on providing responsive, high-quality, and effective learning opportunities for those whose educational careers have been impeded by individual struggles and broader social and economic conditions (Byrd, 2012).

With such a large segment of the South African population contending with adverse conditions, those charged with directing educational institutions may see improvements in overall student performance if their programming is guided by an understanding of the burdens facing non-traditional students. Supports within the school environ provided by staff and instructors to engage with the material and psychosocial challenges that non-traditional students face may serve to create a safe space (Kirk, 2002). Additionally, life skills development programming may facilitate



greater experiences of agency, autonomy, and confidence in managing the requisite skills and expectations of the challenging tertiary education environment.

### **6.3.1 The active role of faculty and staff**

In establishing pathways to educational reengagement, particular attention must be given to mitigating the circumstances that may have previously derailed a student's goals. It will require concentrated effort and resourcing to provide academic and career guidance. As demonstrated in the TSiBA model, such efforts must be multifaceted in nature, with multiple points of support engagement. Instructors, counsellors, mentors, and administrators all play a vital role in identifying challenges that demand redress for individual students (Gorski, 2013).

### **6.3.2 Fostering the student community**

Another aspect of TSiBA that was found to be of great benefit- through both formal research and data collection, and through observation- was that students were essentially mandated to work with one another and in teams toward a variety of outcomes and goals. This lent itself to enhance experiences of relatedness among the members of the student body. In turn, students not only supported one another toward goals of academic achievement, but their interactions also contributed to the enhancement of interpersonal skills that may serve to buoy their professional outlooks and outcomes.

An engaged and accessible Centre for Student Support contributes to an atmosphere wherein students have regular engagement with staff. This staff-student engagement fosters community and empowers students to act as support agents to friends and fellow students facing personal or academic difficulties. Such proactive

engagement may serve to diminish the overall impacts of these challenges (Henderson, 2013).

This familial- almost collectivist- approach values the capabilities of each community member, while contributing constructively to an environment in which each individual is empowered and supported toward positive personal, academic, and professional outcomes (Van Schalkwyk, 2019).

### **6.3.3 Personal empowerment as a tool**

Social and emotional learning (Jones & Doolittle, 2017) is another aspect of the TSIBA educational approach that participants in this study found to be of particularly great benefit. Embedded in the TSIBA curriculum are elements focused on life skills development. This includes group discussion in safe spaces that allow for students to learn from one another and to lean on one another. Such programming serves not only to enhance competence the familial atmosphere,

TSIBA also mandates that students be proactive in seeking out mentorship and guidance from community members, while also collaborating with leaders in a variety of areas to bring mentorship to its students. These activities reflect a curriculum that demands the development of personal and professional agency.

The day-to-day curriculum and experience of TSIBA helps students broaden their knowledge and understanding of self, and promotes their capacity for performance in the professional world. A student proactively engaged in the procurement of personal and professional guidance will consequently gain a more robust understanding of her/his self and abilities (Ryan 2009), while also establishing a professional network that can be utilised after graduation (TSIBA Annual Report 2017,

n.d.). From a grander perspective, such educational programming and outcomes are essential to South Africa's ability to overcome the damning impact of its historical legacy on modern-day conditions and break self-perpetuating cycles of poverty and disempowerment (Freire, 1970; "These three graphs", 2017).

## **6.4 Limitations of this study**

I recognise that this study may have been limited in certain regards. While it is difficult to quantify the impacts of these shortcomings, they deserve attention and consideration in the review of this research, and in considering future research

### **6.4.1 Engagement with research participants**

This study adopted a qualitative design and relied upon information provided by students demonstrating success amid adverse conditions to gain an understanding of this phenomenon. This presents the upperside of the coin- students who were able to engage with this formidable challenge. The underside not covered in the ambit of this research study is the wide spectrum of individuals who become lost to higher education and meaningful employment.

I believe that my research may have benefitted from a greater focus on the challenges specifically facing women seeking education in South Africa. While I did strive to be unbiased and open-minded during the data collection process, I recognise that I may have implicit biases had the potential to impact various aspects of this research.

I also believe that this study may have benefitted from conducting more post-interview interactions- such as a focus group- with the research participants.

Workgroups with research participants were originally to have been scheduled following initial data collection, to allow students to review the data for accuracy and correctness. Unfortunately, time and financial restraints limited follow-up to each participant being able to review and revise her/his participant summary- this would have enhanced the confirmability of the findings.

As discussed in the *Reflexivity* section, I did have some understanding of the various home cultures of the study participants. However, I am certain that more time to engage with these cultures - through both day-to-day interactions and research- might have yielded a richer more in-depth analysis of the data. Approaching this research as an outsider (a USA student) with limited exposure to the lived conditions of the participants- proved challenging. However, my efforts to become immersed in the TSiBA environment before the start of the study may have facilitated some understanding of the context on my part, and the building of rapport with the participants may have allowed for a greater degree of trust and intimacy in the interview process.

#### **6.4.2 Real and potential shortcomings in research design**

For this study, a small sample group of second- and third-year students- in good standing with their respective place of study- was selected, based on the theoretical framework for the study, which posits that the narratives of students emerging from or contending with adverse conditions are of value in trying to better understand the phenomenon of resilience in educational pursuit. This homogenous, purposive sampling- while beneficial in allowing me to identify students that might

provide the sought-after data- was highly subjective and vulnerable to researcher bias (Sharma, 2017).

Further, the qualitative nature of the research design has inherent shortcomings, as it relates to the generalisation of the research. The small, purposive, non-random sample and qualitative design do not permit findings to be generalised, but do provide a thick understanding of the adversity and resilience experienced by the participants. Specifically, because the theoretical framework identified certain factors as indicative of achievement and thriving, there may have been elements that did not receive merited attention.

Another potential shortcoming in this research is the possibility that participants may have altered their responses to interview questions, for any particular reason. This is of special note with regard to the TSiBA-specific questioning, which focused only on beneficial factors within the TSiBA educational model.

## **6.5 Moving forward**

### **6.5.1 Recommendations for application**

Bridging the achievement gap and engaging low-resourced students is essential for any nation to develop and improve standards of living (Byrd, 2012). Essential to this is investment in education. This investment cannot focus just on expanding access- which is undeniably most deserving of attention- but must also recognise and seek to mitigate the needs of non-traditional students. With aggressive attrition at every level of education in South Africa, non-traditional students may comprise at any time the majority of students seeking higher education.

A holistic approach that gives deference to personal growth- as well as academic and professional growth- and strives to mitigate the conditions that might serve to derail academic achievement (Kirk, 2002). This translates to greater investment in institutional student support and counselling, to provide triage level personal support for students and guidance in resolving or managing crises. Supportive (preventative-focused) programmes that address personal and academic adjustment such as the Quiet Time should also be available. This also means that curricula should aim to equip students with scholarly knowledge, professional preparedness, and the life skills needed to manage personal emotions and general distress.

Higher education in South Africa should work toward building strong, cohesive communities on the campus (Johnson & Lazarus, 2008). These communities can be built on strong student-student and student-faculty interactions, fostering healthy socialisation. This sense of community will only serve to further motivate students toward academic efforts (Ryan, 2009), providing greater social incentive and support for these goals.

Finally, the obstacle of finance cannot be overstated in the South African context. As the nation strives to undo the collective legacy of colonialism and apartheid, many people still struggle to access the economy (“These three graphs”, 2017). Given this environment, many students entering higher education will have to contend with financial shortcomings. Tuition assistance programmes and full-tuition scholarships- while not necessarily addressing financial deficits and hinderances

outside of the school setting- can help to mitigate the looming stressor of educational costs.

### **6.5.2 Recommendations for future research**

As I worked to interpret the data I collected during this study, I believe I gained a better understanding of what the implications of supporting non-traditional students are for an educational institution, particularly in the context of a nation still recovering from breadth of damage wrought by the past. Such an undertaking requires a broad-reaching, holistic approach to education ultimately creates an environment wherein students are able to flourish in spite of the challenges and obstacles that may exist in their lives, and in broader society. With the help of this engaged network of students, instructors, school staff, and engaged community members, students may achieve the levels of resilience necessary to reach their academic goals, in spite of challenging circumstances.

It is recommended that more in-depth research be conducted to provide a clearer understanding of the achievements and capacities of the TSiBA model. I believe, ultimately, that replication of the TSiBA model- as proximal as possible- will serve to buoy student retention and throughput in the South African system of higher education. The TSiBA model offers an effective point of educational re-engagement for non-traditional students. This holistic approach to the learning process will enhance learning engagement for non-traditional students and contribute to higher academic achievement and professional preparedness for South African students.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

### **6.6.1 Building better outcomes for South African students**

This study sought to understand the experiences and support structures contributing beneficially to the resilience of college students contending with socially adverse conditions. The findings demonstrated that while traditional and non-traditional learners may follow different paths, a simple but undeniable truth follows them all: conditions may arise that may obstruct or interrupt their career plans. Recognising and accounting for this in educational programming and planning is essential to improving outcomes for South African students.

At present, the pursuit of higher education is a complex and resource-intensive endeavour. It demands significant commitments of time, energy, focus, and finance. An inability to meet any or all of these demands can be detrimental to the entire process. The inability to cover varsity fees, the failure to understand the pressures and expectations of varsity study, the lack of sufficient energies and efforts to devote- these challenges may prove insurmountable. Without proper support structures, they often are.

In order to effectively reengage with non-traditional students and foster their academic achievement, the learning environment must recognise that pathways to student achievement may be obstructed by varying and complex circumstances and conditions. While guidance and support for students through challenging circumstances is essential, they would ultimately be best served by learning and honing the life skills manage these challenges themselves.



As Chris Hani put it:

“We need to create the pathways to give hope to our youth that they can have the opportunity through education and hard work to escape the trap of poverty” (Tandwa, 2018).

It is imperative for the future health and prosperity of South Africa that those seeking to learn and willing to work be provided not only opportunity, but a level of support in those endeavours that recognises the impact individual and community struggles may yield on the student. There must be not only a commitment to foster academic ability, but to support personal growth for students, if South Africa’s student population is to thrive

South Africa’s past recent history is marred by systemic deprivation and brutal oppression. To overcome the impacts of this legacy, South Africa’s future must be rooted in systemic upliftment. By committing to and investing in educational programming that challenges students, South Africa can create the opportunity for a prosperity enjoyed by all its people.

### **6.6.2 Personal reflexivity**

From a personal perspective, this research has impacted me greatly. Getting to know the mission, function, and impact of TSiBA, and its committed faculty and leadership has truly been a life-changing experience. I have had the opportunity to see students that may have struggled in other school environs flourish, because there were people that cared- a network equipped and empowered to recognise and address challenges before they became crises. Further, students were educated toward

empowerment, their personal agency fostered by high expectations matched with strong guidance and mentorship.

I found TSiBA to be a safe space that fostered healing, growth, imagination, aspiration, and, ultimately, achievement. I gained a clearer understanding of the complex and thorough efforts necessary to help students recognise their respective potential and take agency in achieving it. I was welcomed into a family that not only recognised the skills and talents I could contribute to their community, but in fact supported me in my own endeavours and fostered my ability to achieve. This was my experience of TSiBA.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **APPENDIX A**

#### **Semi-structured interview schedule**

1. Where is home for you?
2. What's it like growing up there?
3. Tell me about your neighbourhood
4. How is your relationship with your family?
5. Tell me about them
6. Tell me about your friends and how they've affected your life
7. How was school for you when you were growing up?
8. Tell me about the people that affected your educational experience?
9. How did they impact it?
10. How did you get to TSiBA?
11. What has been your experience here at TSiBA, from the beginning, until now?
12. What aspects of yourself have contributed to your academic progress at  
TSiBA?



## APPENDIX B

### Informed Consent Form



UNIVERSITEIT • STELLENBOSCH • UNIVERSITY  
jou kennisvenoot • your knowledge partner

### **STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

---

Identifying perceived determinants among successful college students in the context of adversity

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Kenneth Hopson (BS Psychology) from the Psychology Department at Stellenbosch University. The results of this study will be contributed to the current research paper. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are graduating from TSiBA College with great academic success

#### **1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This qualitative study aims to gain a clearer understanding of the academic success of students coming from adverse or disadvantaged backgrounds. To achieve this, this study will, through the use of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, examine the narratives of successful students with the intent of finding common themes in identifying protective factors and support structures that have been of benefit.

#### **2. PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

### Participate in an individual interview

The interview will consist of approximately 10 open-ended questions about the participants' familial, community, and educational experience. The participant will be asked to elaborate on any answers that are unclear to the researcher.

### Participate in a focus group discussion

After individual interviews are completed, the participant cohort will be asked to participate in a small group discussion, where the researcher will report his findings based on the individual interviews, and the participants will be provided the opportunity to confirm the findings or add to them.

### Procedure

Each individual interview will be conducted once and will last between 30 and 90 minutes. The focus group's time period will depend on the amount of data found in the study as well as the degree of group participation. Both the individual interviews and focus discussion will be conducted on the TSiBA Cape Town campus, with minimal environmental factor posing a possible risk for contamination.

## **3. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

This study poses medium risk to the participants, seeing that the content which will be discussed is of a personal nature, and may recall emotionally difficult experiences. Participants' responses are completely voluntary and they are under no obligation to answer any question with which they feel uncomfortable. In the event that participation in the study does cause discomfort, counseling services will be made available by TSiBA.

## **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

The subjects will not benefit monetarily from participation. However, this study will contribute to the limited research conducted on the phenomenon of resilience in adult learners. A better understanding of its benefits and its influence on career decision could be a possible benefit for future generations.

### **4. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

Participants will be compensated for one (1) meal at each point of participation.

### **5. CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of keeping the data in a password protected document that only the researcher will have access to

### **6. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

### **7. IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact:

- Professor Anthony Naidoo  
Department of Psychology  
  
Stellenbosch University  
  
(021) 808 3461 / [avnaidoo@sun.ac.za](mailto:avnaidoo@sun.ac.za)

## **8. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty.

You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you

have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact Ms Maléne Fouché [mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622] at the Division for Research Development.

<b>SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE</b>
--

The information above was described to the participant by Kenneth Hopson in Afrikaans or English and the participant is in command of this language or it was satisfactorily translated to him/her. The participant was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to his/her satisfaction.

I hereby consent that the subject/participant may participate in this study.

The participant has been given a copy of this form.

---

**Name of Subject/Participant**

---

**Name of Legal Representative (if applicable)**

---

**Signature of Subject/Participant or Legal Representative**

---

**Date**

**SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR**

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to \_\_\_\_\_  
[*name of the*

*subject/participant*] and/or [his/her] representative \_\_\_\_\_ [*name of the*  
*representative*]. [He/she] was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This

conversation was conducted in [Afrikaans/\*English/\*Xhosa/\*Other] and [no translator was  
used/this conversation was translated into \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_].

---

**Signature of Investigator**

---

**Date**

## APPENDIX C

### **Research Information Brochure**

#### **Explanation of research and invitation for participation**

##### **Perceived influences of collegiate success in the context of social adversity**

My name is Kenneth Hopson, and I am conducting this study to attain my Master's degree in Psychology at Stellenbosch University.

It is generally accepted that troubled homes and communities can have a negative impact on the efforts of the learner. Domestic abuse, substance abuse, financial hardship, and many other problems can hinder a student's ability to recognize and reach his or her academic potential. We see, however, examples of learners achieving academic success in spite of these difficulties. Unfortunately, these students are exceptional in their success. For that reason, it is of great interest to gain a better understanding of just how students from disadvantaged backgrounds traverse these challenges and thrive in an academic setting.

This study will attempt to identify sources of resilience for the student participants. In trying to identify these protective factors, I will use the interview process to ascertain the student's perspective of their success. Namely, what internal qualities and external support structures and conditions allowed the student to transcend the struggles that hinder so many of their peers. This knowledge could be of great value in future efforts to help youth and adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve greater academic success.

The participants of this study will be chosen from TSIBA's current graduating class. Each participant will be asked open-ended questions aimed at ascertaining their personal narratives, with specific focus on familial, community, and educational experiences. At a later time, focus groups of no more than three participants per group discussion will be convened. These groups will be presented with my findings, and the participants will be able to discuss said findings, and add any additional thoughts they may have.

To protect the privacy of the participants, no names or identifying information will be mentioned in the write up of the findings. When needed, pseudonyms (make-up names) will be

used. The report of the findings of the study will be given to TSIBA College and Stellenbosch University.

Thank you for your interest in the study. Please contact me at 18288618@sun.ac.za if you are interested in volunteering for the study or should you have any questions about the study.

Kenneth R. Hopson

## APPENDIX D

### Permission granted by TSiBA to conduct research



TSiBA Cape Town  
Mupine, 307 Forest Drive Extension, Pinelands 7405  
P.O. Box 13071, Mowbray, 7705, Cape Town  
Phone: +27 (0) 21 532 2750 Fax: +27 (0) 21 532 3924  
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Phone: +27 (0) 44 356 2789 Fax: +27 (0) 86 582 1015  
Email: [tsibaeden@tsiba.org.za](mailto:tsibaeden@tsiba.org.za)

[www.tsiba.org.za](http://www.tsiba.org.za) @TSiBA\_Education TSiBAEducation

11 August 2014

Ken Hopson: [krhopson@gmail.com](mailto:krhopson@gmail.com)

cc. Prof Tony Naidoo: [avnaidoo@sun.ac.za](mailto:avnaidoo@sun.ac.za)

cc. TSiBA Dean: Pearl Pugin: [pearl@tsiba.org.za](mailto:pearl@tsiba.org.za)

Dear Ken

#### APPLICATION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT TSiBA Education

Thank you for submitting your signed TSiBA Ethical Agreement to conduct the following research with our graduating students:

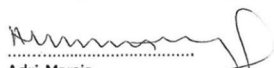
"THIS STUDY WILL COMMENCE WITH 8-10 INTERVIEWS WITH GRADUATING STUDENTS OF TSiBA COLLEGE, COMING FROM SOCIALLY ADVERSE BACKGROUNDS. THE INTERVIEWS WILL BE DIRECTED IN A MANNER THAT OBTAINS PERSONAL NARRATIVES OF THE PARTICIPANTS' RESPECTIVE LIFE EXPERIENCES AND THE IMPACT OF THOSE EXPERIENCES ON THEIR EDUCATION. THE DATA WILL BE ANALYZED AND THE EMERGENT THEORY WILL THEN BE PRESENTED TO FOCUS GROUPS COMPRISED OF THE PARTICIPANTS, FOR DISCUSSION AND ADDITIONAL FEEDBACK."

Permission is granted.

Kindly note the following:

1. Our name is TSiBA Education (ie. Not TSiBA College).
2. Our graduating students ie. BBA3 students are on campus for a time-packed day only on Fridays. As stipulated in the Ethical Agreement, students may not take time out of their academic programme. We would appreciate that it remains your responsibility to ensure that this does not happen, even if a student is prepared to make time out of their class time. You will have to agree to an alternative time which does not jeopardize either their academic or placement responsibilities.
3. Kindly ensure that the meeting time regards the student's transport context and that safety is ensured.
4. As your application to research is with our institution, and it remains the responsibility of the institution to ensure students are protected, all communication w.r.t your research must be cc'd to The Dean, Pearl Pugin please [pearl@tsiba.org.za](mailto:pearl@tsiba.org.za).
5. The provision of permission is based on the assumption that you will, at all times, do what is in the best interest of both our students and our institution.
6. Could you write an email to the students, inviting them to participate in your research. Outline your research, and provide an outline of your interview schedule. Pearl will email this to the graduating students, who may then accept your invitation and communicate with you directly. Kindly keep Pearl informed as to the progress of your research.

We wish you well and thank you for choosing us for your research.

  
Adri Marais  
Executive Director (CEO)

Directors: Prof. F Abrahams (Chairperson), A Marais (CEO), P Kraan (CFO), P Pugin (Dean), L Meinert, G Whitehead, D Pillay, D Msibi, Y Scholtz, S Ueckermann, Prof. E Smit, L Waring TSiBA Education NPC is registered and accredited with the Department of Education as a Private Higher Education Institution No: 2007/HE08/001 Company Reg: 2004/005126/08 | PBO No: 930014613 | NPO No: 043-720-NPO