

Exploring the resilience and epistemic access of first-year female students in higher education

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The transition from secondary to tertiary education often presents many first-year female students with anxiety and emotional stress. Subsequently, poorly managing this shift may increase academic risk and compromise their academic success. While a plethora of studies contribute towards the phenomenon of resilience as a positive predictor of the learning experience of female students in higher education, other scholarly findings suggest the key role resilience plays in supporting students to overcome challenges, manage their wellbeing and ultimately acquire epistemic access. Moreover, there is a significantly burgeoning focus on the positive outcomes of the resilience of women in education. However, while many of the studies highlight gender as a noteworthy core construct, to date, little is known about the first-year learning experience (FYE) of female students and how they may negotiate epistemic access through academic resilience. Hence the main aim of this article is to explore what factors enable academic resilience and to what extent such factors influence epistemic access among first-year female students. An exploratory qualitative research approach was used to capture the learning experiences of 20 hospitality accounting first-year female students. Data were collected by conducting both focus group sessions and individual semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study identified four main themes. The findings of this article have implications for promoting gender equality and academic outcomes of first-year female students in understanding the risk factors, as well as encouraging the protective factors that enable their epistemic access.

Contribution: The article sheds light on how an intangible construct such as resilience serves as a vehicle for epistemic access, more especially for first-year female students.

Keywords: academic resilience; resilience; epistemic access; first-year student experience; protective factors; risk factors; first-year female students.

Introduction

The envisioning of a democratic education system in South Africa repudiates the evils that were deeply rooted in historical colonialism, apartheid and a patriarchal society (Akala 2018). Despite a significant transformation in the landscape of higher education, systemic inequalities in race, ethnicity, language and gender continue to infiltrate the practices and social structures of South Africa. For example, higher education has to deal with the myriad of complexities experienced, mainly, by the first-year students that are of the first-generation status, experience language barriers and many students that enter higher education emerge from poverty-stricken homes, rural or poorly developed areas or previously attended schools that were under-resourced or poorly developed (Mampane & Bouwer 2011). In recent years, South African universities are witnessing student protests on a myriad of issues that become disruptive and disturbs the learning process (Mpungose 2020). Hence, most first-year students are deemed at risk when they enter higher education. In previous decades, given the dominance of patriarchal systems, Alabi, Seedat-Khan and Abdullahi (2019) affirmed that the cultural and traditional dynamics in South African societies were disablements to the progress of women's participation in higher education. Notably, the gender parity index in South Africa demonstrates that South Africa fares very well in terms of female representation in the higher education sector (Khuluvhe & Negogog 2021), in terms of access and success, as female students are largely favoured over their male counterparts.

Some studies (Fourie 2020; Tinto 2014) explored the factors that compromise the academic success of first-year students to being academically at risk. Equally, other studies maintain that the

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first-year learning experience (FYE), significantly, influences students' approaches to learning and their obligation to complete their studies (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis 2015; Tinto 2014). According to Tinto (2014), there is a need for students to be formally and informally integrated into the institution to ensure their academic success. Furthermore, a nuanced understanding of how first-year female students that may be confronted with a myriad of adversities in their personal and daily lives manage to acquire epistemic access. Particularly, there is a growing scholarship contribution of the FYE of the students, and it becomes worthwhile recognising and addressing gender at the first-year level of study and further highlighting the debate on social inclusion and a truly transformed higher education system in post-apartheid South Africa. Considering the increasing participation of female students in higher education, the research focus on the resilience of female students is less understood. Hence, the impetus for this article addresses the epistemic experience of first-year female students in South African higher education that is less explored, yet nascent.

Literature review

Conceptual and theoretical framework

The notion of epistemic access

The adjustment for many first-year female students into higher education requires a certain amount of resilience that will reward them with academic success. According to Morrow (2009), gaining physical access to higher education does not suffice for academic success for most students. Students need to understand the 'rules of the game,' which is to engage and actively become a participant in meaningful learning and disciplinary knowledge. Hence, acquiring access to the knowledge of the discipline is said to have epistemic access (Morrow 2009; Muller 2014).

The present study affirms resilience as an asset (protective factors) in which it examines the context of resilience as an enabler towards epistemic access for first-year female students as well as the constraints (risk factors) confronting such students.

First-year female student learning experience in South African higher education

A number of studies describe the FYE in higher education as a homogeneous group, showing less importance on students' identities such as gender (Kim Miller et al. 2021; Pascarella et al. 2004; Soria & Stebleton 2012). Hence, there is a need for the study of the role of female participation in the FYE demands a shift in attention, considering the recently increased representation of women in the South African higher education landscape (Khuluvhe & Negogog 2021). Hence an explorative inquiry on having an improved understanding, particularly on how women in their first year of study in acquiring their academic outcomes are pertinent to the scholarship of the female gender in higher education. Recent studies confirm that females in higher education encounter numerous trials and obstacles that can

be conceptualised through the lens of gender (Lin 2016; Meyers 2016). Consequently, an ignorance of understanding gender differences may limit pedagogical innovations and delivery, which has the potential to constrain student epistemic access and success. According to Lindsey (2005), gender is the different cultural, social and psychological qualities assigned to males and females recognised by social contexts.

Some recent studies confirm that the FYE of female students is presented with a greater amount of social and emotional challenges when compared with their male counterparts (Klein 2010; Motsabi, Diale & Van Zyl 2020; Rind 2015). Despite these findings, previous studies suggest that female students are more committed and dedicated to pursuing higher education studies and show higher optimisation of higher education than male students (Grebennikov & Skaines 2009; Volchok 2018).

Understanding the concept of resilience

The concept of resilience is manifold and is not limited to a singular definition. Furthermore, resilience can be described as a process, a personal trait or an outcome. Earlier studies on resilience (Richardson et al. 1990) consider resilience as a process of managing and coping with disruptive, stressful or challenging events. Whereas resilience as a process demonstrates a positive adaptation of an individual, regardless of the traumatic or difficult experiences they endured (Luthar & Cicchetti 2000:858). Grotberg (2003) describes resiliency as having the ability to manage, resist and be transformed in times of adversity. Alternate conceptions of resilience are viewed as a process of risk management and development during adverse times (Strümpfer 2013). Whereas Ungar (2012:17) theorises the concept of resilience as the way in which individuals safeguard their wellbeing by collectively traversing their way through different states of emotional, social, cultural and physical resources. Abiola and Udofia (2011) imply that resilience is related to an improvement in the quality of life and well-being in times of adversity. Masten (2014:6) refers to resilience as 'the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the viability, the function, or the development of that system'. Similarly, Rutter (1987:316) defines resilience as a 'positive role of individual differences in people's response to stress and adversity'. Notwithstanding the varying definitions of resilience intersect a range of themes such as being able to bounce back, being resourceful, improving wellbeing, adapting to circumstances, responding to risk and adversity and threat or challenge as a core element. More recently, Reyes et al. (2015) consider resilience as a dynamic and contextual process that can be instilled in the learning lives of students. Equally numerous studies conclude that resilience is considered as the positive outcome, an innate ability, strength or quality, or process that is likely to impact positively on aspects of an individual's performance, achievement, health and well-being. Resilience is necessary for guiding and supporting students to manage the academic risks or challenges they

may face with the goal of achieving academic outcomes (Strümpfer 2013).

According to the scholarship and theory on resilience, there are numerous protective factors that serve to safeguard against the effects of risk exposure or risk factors.

Protective and risk factors

For the purpose of this study, the concepts of risk and protective factors are understood in the context of higher education and intend to build on resiliency theory. While the locus of many other studies identifies the academic performance of first-year students, resilience theory offers an alternative lens at students who have acquired epistemic access (Morrow 2009) and success and then asks how and why so (Morales 2014). Given the multiplicity of definitions of resilience, various advocates of resilience concur that resilience stems from the interplay between risks and protective factors (Kitano & Lewis 2005; Morales 2014; Rutter 2000). This study is guided through the lens of resilience theory. Zimmerman (2013) postulates that resiliency theory provides a conceptual framework for considering a strengths-based approach to studying and understanding how and why first-year female students acquire epistemic access despite the potential risks they are exposed to. Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) refer to the term protective factors as promotive factors that comprise certain assets and resources. Such assets are the personal attributes and qualities of a student, whereas resources include support systems and structures that are meant to enable female students during their first year of study in higher education. Protective factors are meant to produce positive academic outcomes for first-year female students (Masten & Tellegen 2012).

Risk factors are those variables that have the propensity to heighten a negative outcome while protective factors are those that improve or mitigate a negative outcome. For example, protective factors can be considered as those variables that shield factors that pose a threat or risk (Wright & Masten 2005). For the purpose of this study, risk and protective factors are understood in the context of higher education and intend to build on resilience education and theory. Moreover, Morales (2008) describes risk factors as the environmental obstacles that may endanger the academic outcomes of a student. In reference to a higher education environment, examples of risk factors that inhibit students' academic success include; schooling background, limited or no access to technology, limited or no financial support to pursue academic goals, limited access to academic resources (Kitano & Lewis 2005) and lower socioeconomic status (Morales 2014). On the other hand, internal attributes such as emotional intelligence, temperament, coping abilities, efficacy, self-esteem and high aspirations are considered either protective or risk factors. Moreover, external factors, such as family support, social networks, culture, class, gender, and so on, may also be considered as potential protective or risk factors. The exploration and identification

of protective factors and risk factors in terms of education resilience may serve as a guide towards pedagogy intervention design.

Resilience in South African education

Ngubane (2019) argues that while the phenomenon is complex, it does lend itself to varied interpretations in terms of the lived experiences of people, their families and cultures. For example, in South Africa, the literature espouses that the construct of academic success is considered a predictor of resiliency, whereas in other countries, academic success is understood as a normal developmental task (Ngcobo 2019).

Quantitative and qualitative research on resilience education has gained traction across the globe as well as in South African education. From an international perspective, in an African-American study, Williams (2011) found an increase in resilience from those students from poorer homes and living with single parents. Similarly, in a South African study that was related to students from poverty, Dass-Brailsford (2005) established that poor students were more motivated to study and displayed entrepreneurial efficacies, which contributed positively to academic resilience. Notably, Wills and Hofmeyr (2019) concluded according to their study that there is a systematic difference between resilient students who demonstrate greater academic achievement when compared with their non-resilient peers along with a number of dimensions. For example, students that come from schools that are poorly resourced show greater academic resilience juxtaposed to students that are educated in well-resourced and higher-quality-providing schools. A study led by Sibisi (2021) revealed that the protective factors such as family support, a motivating academic and social environment, personal traits and religious beliefs varied in the contexts of the students' lives, which positively contributed to their resilience. Likewise, Mlotshwa (2019) found that protective factors do, in fact, impart, nurture and promote academic resilience.

Methodology

An exploratory qualitative research approach was used to capture the learning experiences of 16 hospitality accounting first-year female students. Data were collected by conducting both focus group sessions and individual semi-structured interviews.

Data collection and analysis

Prospective first-year female students in hospitality accounting were informed and were invited to participate in the study. Employing purposive sampling techniques; 16 hospitality accounting students expressed their acceptance to partake in the study over the first semester of their first year of study. This study drew on the triangulation of two sources of data. The first data source was obtained from the focus group sessions with the participants that were then followed by the second source of data, which was individual semi-structured interviews. Some of the questions asked in the

focus group sessions included, 'Describe your FYE'; 'As a female, what are the obstacles you were faced with whilst learning and engaging in your first year of study?'; 'How did you manage or overcome the challenges that you were confronted with? The focus group was asked to respond to the open-ended questions probed by the researcher. The responses from the focus group session were recorded. The second source of data included semi-structured interviews, which were guided by a list of prospective questions; this allowed the researcher the freedom and flexibility to digress and probe if further information was required (Mackey & Gass 2015). When employing a triangulation strategy, focus groups allow the researcher to access and probe deeper into participants' responses during the individual interviews (Caillaud & Flick 2017). Hence a deeper and richer understanding of the phenomenon is achieved through social constructivist meaning. Furthermore, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was adopted to arrive at the common themes from the study.

Findings and discussion

The findings of the study identified four themes that resonate with the resilience protective factor framework that includes the enablers (protective factors) as well as the constraints (risk factors). The four themes that emerged from this study include family dynamics and support system, learning resources and the home environment, scaffolding tools in the learning environment and finally, student residence and peer collaboration.

The findings and discussion on these themes are presented.

Family dynamics and support system

Some of the students mentioned that the support and guidance they received from their female family members encouraged them to pursue their academic goals and largely contributed to new ways of understanding. According to the participants, they applauded their family support system as a safety net that encouraged them to overcome failure as well as to reflect and redirect their thinking that is important to succeed in the attainment of academic goals:

'When I had some difficulties in coping with my learning, I got help from my big sister who was in her final year of studies and she motivated and told me cos I am a girl I should never give up but keep trying [...]. She reminded me that she also was a first-year student and experienced many challenges and problems in first year, and failed some modules, but always tried, cos as a girl we need to be educated and successful.' (Participant 1, student, woman)

'[...] My family stood behind me all the time, during tough and good times and this made me stronger [...] my mum told me, that even if I fail I must keep trying and not give in [...] I knew that I had to realise what their purpose is and why I should value my education. My mum too is a strong woman and I would follow in her footsteps.' (Participant 2, student, woman)

'My mum is a domestic worker [and] has worked hard as single parent. I will do my best to study hard and make her proud. So

far I am passing my first tests and this what I owe to my mum; so one day I will become successful and help my mum.' (Participant 3, student, woman)

According to the above scenarios, students expounded that they were able to manage their personal and academic lives through trial and error, through the guidance and assistance of family members. These students were able to identify manageable coping mechanisms. In addition, they were able to make the necessary changes in their family lives that allowed them to appreciate and value their learning. Furthermore, this participant drew on the strength and aspirations of their female family members. These students valued and perceived their female family members as role models. Their affective dimension of meaningful learning greatly depends on the family support and strength offered by other female members. According to these participants, acquiring academic success meant identifying and ranking their academic goals.

Contrarily, some participants lamented that the home front and family environment annulled their academic engagement and progress:

'As a female my family expects me to take care of my smaller siblings and do household chores. No time for additional work.' (Participant 4, student, woman)

'[...] I have to cook and clean and have so many responsibilities and am unable to complete my homework or assignments [...] I am supposed to be grateful that I am getting an education but I have to do my bit in the home.' (Participant 5, student, woman)

According to this participant:

'[...] I ask my mum to give me time to complete my assignments and projects but she tells me I had the whole day at college and home chores are more important. Nobody understands as they never went to university or college or completed grade 12.'

'At home I have no support from older siblings or parents cos; they not too educated. Mum only completed grade 10. So nobody to help me when I get stuck in some places and they don't know how to use computers etc.' (Participant 6, student, woman)

A depiction of the above scenarios exposes a risk element towards their learning and epistemic access. These participants noted that limited or family support from the home front stifled their epistemic access. According to the families of these female students, supplementary academic undertakings such as homework, assignments and projects should take lesser importance over personal or family chores, and the like. The constant discord between domestic responsibilities and role expectations presents a constraint towards the pursuit of female academic goals and responsibilities. In such instances, the role expectation of a female student is reduced to a caregiver, and domestic chores take precedence over personal and long-term academic goals of female students in the family environment.

In other instances, family members may not have the necessary academic capital to assist or empathise with the students' academic endeavours and responsibilities. This

scenario was depicted by one of the participants who lamented that their parents prohibited them from meeting with friends after campus to complete homework or attend class activities:

'I was not allowed to invite my friends over cos my dad never liked the idea. They said I must attend to the work at home and help my mum as I am the only girl child in the family [...]. When we needed to meet as group to discuss the project or homework, I was punished and sometimes never attended campus the following day [...]. My dad does not understand how things work in the university. As he never studied after grade 12. I try to explain to him but he never understands. But I somehow managed to get in contact with some of other girls in my class I told them my problem. And this helped a lot. I won't let the fear of my dad affect my school work.' (Participant 7, student, woman)

The male parent of this participant was of the view that activities out of university hours meant more of a social engagement, rather than fulfilling academic commitments. The parents of the above-mentioned scenario presume that a female's precedence is to nurture and take care of the household and family needs. According to this depiction, the families or relatives of first-generation students generally lack the social and cultural capital, which may include familiarity with the university environment, its expectations from students and the rigour required for academic success. Subsequently, it is thus difficult for them to understand the need for the student to spend time on academic activities outside university hours. The views of some of the participants felt that their family's disinclination towards the support of academic teamwork was an obstacle to epistemic success. Family dynamics clash with the university culture. This may influence how students interact with their peers to accomplish assessment goals. It is as if academic study becomes a battleground, as power relations at home become at odds with university demands. Female students are faced with the choice of defying their families or accepting and obeying their expectations.

In a different scenario, one female participant labelled her home environment as an intimidating and fearful learning space. Consequently, disruption and domestic violence stalled her from doing homework or additional academic activities:

'[...] I live in a small cramped up space [...]. We were evicted and I had to live in a transit camp [...]. Often I hear loud violent noises and people swearing and fighting. The men drink and abuse the women. More noises as a girl makes me afraid [...] I am never able to do my school work or practice on activities I was given during the day [...] I sometimes unable to hand my group activities on time and I feel embarrassed to report to my group about what happens at home. They may laugh at me [...] I have to go early in the morning and on weekends to campus to get work done and study for tests.' (Participant 8, student, woman)

In this representation, severe and poor living conditions and violence at home certainly have a significant, negative impact on academic progress. In such instances, where domestic violence is rife and the home environment is disruptive, the student is unable to meet her academic goals. Moreover, this

student makes every endeavour to satisfy her academic responsibilities and group members' expectations despite the fact that she may be unable to focus, which may have a negative impact on her identity and self-esteem. Defiantly, students that arrive from more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to have better access to academic and social resources, as well as mobility and dispositions that allow them to successfully navigate the academic system. The dearth of family support and a favourable physical learning space that supports independent learning presents a harsh reality for this student. A caveat to the aforementioned denies this student from independent learning and academic self-efficacy, as she is unable to engage in academic responsibilities such as homework after university hours. Apart from the routine adjustment required of a first-year student, trying to reconcile academic demands and the expectations of a university with her home environment portends to compromise this student's academic goals and epistemic access.

Two participants admitted that they are single mothers and that their maternal responsibilities take precedence over academic commitment and goals. The narrative of one of the participants mentioned the following:

'I am a mum with a two year old baby. When I get home I have to attend to baby and give all my attention as well as attend to household chores [...] hardly have time do my Accounting homework and group assignments [...]. There are time I am unable to attend campus when he is unwell [...] I miss out a lot and my study falls behind [...] also times when I have to take him to the clinic or doctor, and then I miss out on my lectures [...]. But I understand that this course in hospitality is for him and that I can get a better job and work to support him. So I try to make time [...] study when I can [...] but no social life. To catch up with my tests and assignments. I know I am capable [...] I let my family down by getting pregnant early in grade 12 and now have to make up to my mum and family name.' (Participant 9, student, woman)

While this participant voiced her commitment to her maternal responsibilities, household chores present her with time management challenges, as she could not control how they allocate their time. Being absent from group activities because of childcare responsibilities may well compromise her epistemic understanding of the course she is engaged in, which may likely hinder cognitive progress. While this participant is presented with numerous challenges, her commitment to succeed academically, self-confidence and honouring her family name (the consequence of teenage pregnancy) are likely to dispel the adversities she is confronted with. Hence the aforementioned intangible resources are warranted for enabling epistemic access.

Another participant emotionally expressed how she is determined to study despite the financial struggles that she is fraught with. This student lamented that despite these struggles, she will not give up. In order to sustain her food and accommodation, she had to work as a domestic worker:

'I am still an unregistered student [...] waiting for NSFAS to sort my funding [...]. My home is in Pietermaritzburg [...] My mother is hoping one day I will qualify and help at home as my brother

is a drug addict and he has taken everything we owned; we were hoping that he will work and help at home as I don't have a father. I am studying in Durban [be] cause Pietermaritzburg does not offer Hospitality. And I have no food and shelter, and am staying at a house as a maid in so I get a place to stay and food to eat. In the evenings, there is a lot of work for me to do, and in the mornings, I have to clean up with nothing to eat, and then walk from Mayville to campus. The system has failed me. I am always late for lectures, and have no time to catch up and understand my work. But I will keep trying [...].' (Participant 3, student, woman)

The depiction of the above scenarios reflects the lack of basic subsistence to sustain this student, while she pursues her academic studies. The unaffordability of transport to campus forced her to walk approximately 12 km to campus daily. On many occasions, she arrived late, tired and hungry on campus, resulting in poor concentration and lesser engagement in class activities. Furthermore, her socio-economic circumstances are a motivation for her relentless endeavours, which may be favourable to be an advantage to epistemic access. While tertiary education is regarded as an opportunity for students from poor socioeconomic backgrounds to change their circumstances for the better, this is difficult to achieve when their economic conditions impact their ability to achieve academic success. Thus, there is a connection between a lack of financial resources and trying to be successful as a university student. The academic success of a student confronting such a predicament is likely to be severely compromised. The education system that is unresponsive to the basic needs of economically disadvantaged female students causes frustration among such students and undermines their well-being.

Learning resources and the home environment

Some of the participants shared that they had limited or no access to prescribed textbooks, which denied them epistemic access:

'We can't afford the textbook and sometimes not available in library. Most of activities are from the book. But we can make a plan my friend will lend me book on campus I will write down the activity, sometimes can't afford the photocopies. But I make a plan. I need to pass this accounting.' (Participant 10, student, woman)

Indeed, one student commented that she avoids going home during the university holidays or long weekends, as this restricts her completing practice assignments and assessment activities:

'[...] [R]ather spend the hols [holiday] or long weekends at residence, friend's place, so that I can do more constructive work. At home, family expects me to take care of my smaller siblings and household chores. No time for additional work.' (Participant 11, student, woman)

A few participants also shared their frustration in accessing e-learning from home, as they could not afford virtual collaboration, such as the internet or Wi-Fi:

'At home there is no computer to work on or the Wi-Fi as we cannot afford these luxuries. I am unable to connect with friends

when they discuss homework or class activities on WhatsApp [social media] because I don't have the Wi-Fi, I am unable to know what's happening. When I get back to school the next day, they talk about their discussions the previous night, and by I feel so left out!! At school there is Wi-Fi. This means the lights for me go on at school, but goes off when I am at home.' (Participant 13, student, woman)

A lack of digital connectivity restricts online learning activities and social collaboration, as well as online reflective learning. In this situation, this participant felt 'left out' and 'alienated' from academic activities that would supplement their learning. The lack of access restricts collaboration and engagement, undermining the academic goals of the FYE, thereby restricting epistemic access.

Another finding that came out strongly was the acknowledgment of financial access to academic resources such as textbooks, computers or even mobile technology. Concomitantly, these resources were the most tangible and determining factors that facilitated their epistemic access to higher education. Participants who were able to access these resources expressed their determination to optimise available opportunities to the best of their abilities. Providing access to these resources means that students have the potential to engage optimally in both the academic and social activities that underlie the tenets of the assessment.

Scaffolding tools in the learning environment

During their first year of study, the participants found that the different services offered by the university enabled their learning and engagement. The first scaffolding tool highlighted by the students was their involvement with hospitality accounting tutorial sessions:

'[...] lucky for the tutorial sessions. I did not give up ... I was able to find my mistake and understand it better [...]. The individual interaction with my tutors helped by see what I struggled with.' (Participant 13, student, woman)

'[...] The tutorials gave me new hope in understanding accounting; as I had never done this subject before and was afraid to ask for help. But now it makes more sense in understanding.' (Participant 12, student, woman)

'The tutorials were motivating and I started enjoying accounting [...]. Before I never understood anything. I actually started enjoying this subject [...]. My tutor told me to keep trying and I did just that [...].' (Participant 10, student, woman)

The tutorial sessions offered by the university present participants with a greater level of agency and motivation. Consequently, as they persevered in their learning and became more active participants in the learning process, they no longer perceived themselves to be passive learners but to be more interactive and responsible. The students claimed that they made optimal use of these learning tools as the learning activities invariably necessitated the implementation of the learning resources. Significantly, the participants who were able to demonstrate these resilient traits improved their self-efficacy and inculcated self-confidence, motivation and epistemological belief.

Noteworthy, participants confirmed the advantages of the students' residence tutorial programme offered by the university in the evenings and weekends:

'I was very worried about accounting as I did not understand the subject at all [...]. But I heard that in some evenings there are some accounting tutorials taking place at res in the evenings and this helped me a lot for the project [...] I also learnt from other tutors [...] also how to learn different ways [...] I feel I understand better at res tut cause able to do the project tasks [...]. As a first-year female, I felt lost and alone but the tutors encouraged me to work harder in accounting and try, other female students also assisted me with my personal problems that affected my work [...]. These evening tutorials made me stronger and not lose hope in accounting tests and activities [...]' (Participant 13, student, woman)

A residence tutorial programme was offered to students doing accounting in their first year. Those who attended said that this improved their understanding of the assessment activities. Additional academic support from a different tutor improved their approaches to learning and cognitive development and hence their confidence in attempting assessment activities and tasks.

In other instances, participants mentioned that the library offered them a learning space that improved their learning and engagement:

'[...] I never been to a library before. And was quite scared by the building and so many books all in high-level English. As English is my third speaking language. But I knew I will not let this trouble me or scare me. I asked for help. The library staff were happy to help me and made me feel comfortable [...]' The librarian showed me how to find information and use the writing centre to assist with my assignment [...]' (Participant 14, student, woman)

Despite their lack of knowledge of library facilities and operations, female students proactively optimised the scaffolding tools and services offered by the services of the library. Accordingly, these participants adopted a positive stance in seeking assistance and guidance from the library writing centre support staff. Such students may be characterised by the desire to learn, showing determination to succeed and are prepared to work against the odds to the best of their ability. Similarly, they are willing to take advantage of the resources that the university offers to achieve their academic goals.

Student residence and peer collaboration

Similarly, one group of students mentioned working together (study cohorts) after campus at student residences:

'After campus we meet at Res. Around 5 PM – 6 PM we start moonlighting – we get together and sometimes others from, for example, Accounting join and we begin with study groups. Lucky at residence we have the facilities (Internet) to help us with our additional work or assignments [...] our understanding is much better [...]' (Participant 13, student, woman)

Student residences thus offer positive learning spaces for students to meet and work on class activities and homework or conduct project meetings. Many students expressed

appreciation for the resources offered at student residences, which facilitated collaborative activities. They also indicated that peer learning was a positive form of academic engagement that ultimately facilitated positive academic performance.

Moreover, these students found that working together brought about a positive learning experience, and they were able to overcome many learning challenges. They confirmed that they relied on one another's cognitive abilities, which allowed them to reflect on their own learning style and approach:

'[...] Working together was very helpful cause we can learn from each other and using the Wi-Fi and BB helped us. If we were at home, like our other mates, we will not get this opportunity. If I go to my home, I am unable to get this opportunity, so for me life at res was a great help to my studies. Sometimes we would chat on WhatsApp with those not in our res group, and help them with their problems.' (Participant 14, student, woman)

In a different scenario, two female students complained that teaming up in a group with the opposite gender (male) posed a learning challenge:

'I have a problem with learning with males in my group; as I came from an all-girls school, it becomes a challenge. I sometimes have to realise that males do things differently from us females and it can become quite frustrating and time wasted! Many times we disagree. But this something I have to accept and learn and try to stop calling this a challenge. Working with a different gender is something new for me! But I know this what's expected from me in the real working world.' (Participant 15, student, woman)

These participants complained that the work ethics of males and females differed, such that time was wasted in reaching a consensus on group activities and assignments. Female students who were first time engaging with students of the opposite gender initially found this to be uncomfortable and a learning obstacle, resulting in poor group achievements. However, as they further engaged collectively with all group members, they were able to realise the synergistic benefits of working collectively. The participants, further admitted that this was not an impasse, but a learning adjustment on their part.

Conclusion

This study presents useful insight into the existing body of research on the resilience of first-year students, more exclusively among female students and how they negotiate and access learning.

A reflection on the emerging themes and narratives, it is apparent that not only gender but also contextual barriers to epistemic access can be compromised. However, the perseverance, resilience and tenacity of many of the female participants became evident, as they were able to navigate and overcome some of the challenges experienced during their first year of learning. Despite the calamitous circumstances that first-year female students find themselves in, a means to 'fight and flee' from the poverty trap is evident in this study. Significantly, this study demonstrates that apart

from inspiration, hope and determination, having a supportive home environment, the necessary learning resources and a supportive learning community represents the enablers to epistemic access for most underserved communities. Given such constraints, for many of these participants, the desire to succeed academically surpasses all hindrances and is indeed a momentous feat as described by them.

A few limitations are evident in this study. Firstly, the study is a qualitative approach and secondly, it was limited to a smaller sample size. A suggestion for a mixed-method design will encourage an improved understanding of the resilience and the learning experiences of first-year female students. This study recognises a further limitation such as researcher bias. The conflicting role of the researcher as well as the lecturer to the students may compromise the quality of the responses although the researcher reminded the participants of the role and relationship between the researcher and participants.

There is currently a dearth of research that shows evidence of the resilience and learning experiences of female students, more especially in a South African context. Presently, the literature mainly highlights the wider population of FYE. Indeed, this research is essential and required; however, future research on the resilience of female students at different levels of their study will add to the body of research on resilience. This study intends to provide policymakers, curriculum developers and academic staff with a deeper understanding of how females negotiate epistemic access during their first year of study and how much students demonstrate resilience to manage and overcome adversities they confronted with risks to their academic success that result not only from their socio-economically disadvantaged homes.

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Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contribution

R.M. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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