RESEARCH ARTICLE

Diversity Includes Disability: Experiences of Resilience in a University Residence

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Abstract

The provision of residence accommodation is a persistent challenge that is faced by universities across the globe. However, suitable accommodation for students with disabilities is an even greater challenge that is exacerbated by the absence of appropriately designed, maintained and managed residences. In particular, the adverse impact on wheelchair users and students whose disabilities require specific design adaptations is acute. This article will focus on the experiences of students with disabilities in university residences. The study on which this article is based employed a phenomenological theoretical approach with 'resilience' as the conceptual framework. The findings reveal that many stressors impacted students with disabilities in university residences and that these stressors potentially hampered their performance. However, these students developed personal attributes and ways of responding to the stressors they encountered, and many devised social networks utilisation to address their challenges and navigate institutional barriers. A particular focus was that embracing diversity is crucial for all operations at universities to counteract the discrimination and stigmatisation that are often experienced by students with disabilities.

Keywords

access; accommodation; belonging; diversity; resilience; students with disabilities

Introduction: Residence Accommodation in South African Universities

The massification of higher education globally has substantially widened access for all types of students, particularly students with disabilities. This has resulted in a significant increase in the numbers of students with disabilities who have enrolled at universities (Kim & Lee, 2016; Timmerman & Mulvihill, 2015), and it has required the intensification of specifically adapted academic and accommodation facilities at universities (Mugume & Luescher, 2015; Odundo, Origa, Nyandega & Ngaruiya, 2015).

One important provision for students at universities is appropriate residence accommodation (Ajayi, Nwosu & Ajani, 2015; Gilson & Dymond, 2010; Najib, Yusof & Sani, 2012). A number of studies on student residences (Abdullahi, Yusoff & Gwamna, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2016) show that students' performance is highly dependent on the physical and non-physical facilities that the institution provides. However, the literature has shown

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that many institutions fail to meet residence accommodation obligations and that this has resulted in poor academic performance and high attrition rates by affected students (Abdullahi et al., 2017).

Residence issues are a perennial problem for universities and frequently surface in demands by protesting students (Mugume & Luescher, 2015; Odundo et al., 2015; Yakaboski & Birnbaum, 2013). Students' demands have highlighted issues such as the poor management of residences, a lack of basic facilities, the distance of residences from teaching venues, and rules that compel students to remove their belongings during recess periods (Ajayi et al., 2015; Egwunyenga, 2009; Oke, Aigbavboa & Raphiri, 2017). In South Africa, similar problems led to the establishment of a ministerial committee in 2012, to investigate the extent of the problems arising from the unsatisfactory state of student residences at some universities (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2015). The committee's report emphasises the importance of well-managed residences and notes that students who are accommodated in residences with good facilities tend to perform better than those who live off-campus or in residences with a poor infrastructure. Moreover, the committee drew attention to suitable accommodation for students with disabilities. While universities in general had adequately managed and functioning residences, the committee found little effort had been channelled into making residence accommodation suitable for students with disabilities. For example, a small percentage of residences provided access for wheelchair users or had suitably adapted toilets or bathrooms, and most universities did not have accommodation policies for physically challenged students. Van der Merwe (2017, p. 2) cites an interview with a young activist for people with disabilities who attested to the poor state of residence accommodation:

> If you don't have the necessary survival skills it is very hard. You are in a residence, you have never cooked, ironed, made your bed by yourself, and you must do these things on top of the struggles with your academic work, all without the necessary support. You feel useless, like you want to quit.

South Africa has comprehensive legislation on promoting accessibility and inclusivity for people with disabilities. For example, universities are required by law to provide proper housing for students with disabilities (DHET, 2015) and student residences are expected to be conducive to academic activities outside the classroom (Egwunyenga, 2009). However, most universities have struggled to establish residences that accommodate the various needs of students with disabilities (Dunn & Dunkel, 2013; Mugume & Luescher, 2015). In some cases, universities have turned to public–private partnerships for assistance, although these initiatives have not been without setbacks (McBride, 2017; Mugume & Luescher, 2015; Taylor, 2017). Studies have shown that finances and a lack of the availability of land have been major challenges in the quest to provide suitable accommodation for diverse student bodies. Most universities prefer to accommodate students with disabilities on campus for safety and for easier access to central facilities such as libraries and lecture rooms, but the conversion of outdated buildings and residences is costly and thus highly challenging.

The DHET (2013) estimates that the South African university student population will reach 1.6 million by 2030. In anticipation of the concomitant student accommodation requirements, the DHET expects that universities will have provided at least 400 000 additional beds by that time. Commentators see this as a positive development, provided that residence accommodation meets universal design standards such as user-friendly access for all students regardless of their disability status (Powell, 2013; Watchorn, Larkin, Ang & Hitch, 2013). It is with this initiative in mind that this article considers the resilience factor that students with disabilities possess. It also explores how this impacts their experiences of university residence life. The guiding question that the study asked was: "How do students with disabilities overcome the challenges they experience in university residences?"

Overview of the Literature on Residence Problems for Students with Disabilities

The literature on students with disabilities in the higher education context mainly refers to the accommodation of students in classrooms, laboratories and libraries (Chiwandire & Vincent, 2017; Matshedisho, 2010) as these students continue to experience physical access and attitudinal barriers to their participation in lectures, laboratories and practical training (Lyner-Cleophas, Swart, Chataika & Bell, 2014; Tugli, Zungu, Ramakuela, Goon & Anyanwu, 2013). The cited studies point out that poorly designed teaching and learning infrastructure can cause both academic and social exclusion of students with disabilities.

In response to widespread concern about the provision of inadequate and unsuitable facilities for students with disabilities in university residences, a growing body of literature has explored this issue (Ajayi et al., 2015). Various studies point out that students with disabilities face challenges such as manoeuvring through multi-level buildings or accessing common rooms and cooking facilities (Timmerman & Mulvihill, 2015).

Apart from infrastructural issues that students with disabilities may encounter, the assignment of roommates can also give rise to problems (Egwunyenga, 2009; Payne, 2017). Because residences are 'a home from home' for students, there is an expectation that roommates should live in harmony and mutual respect and that they should accept each other as members of a 'family'. Residence committees thus commonly organise inter-residential activities to build relationships. However, it often happens that students with disabilities feel discriminated against or excluded (Gilson & Dymond, 2010; Lourens, 2015). Tolman (2017, p. 532) stresses the importance of residence life for all students, noting that it shapes their behaviours and that their academic success hinges on it because "…at the heart of this residential experience are social interactions and the feeling of belonging to the campus community". Depending on their specific disabilities, students may need assistance from a roommate or other students. Potential roommates for students with disabilities therefore need to be identified and supported. Some universities have made progress in embracing diversity through initiatives such as the Listen, Live and Learn (LLL) project at Stellenbosch University that encourages social cohesion and enables all participants to plan and work together as members of the student community (Smorenburg & Dunn, 2014).

However, studies have also noted that students with disabilities may be exposed to exploitation such as being made to pay for assistance given by other students. More disturbingly, in some instances their assistance extended to the demand for sexual favours. For example, Lourens (2015) reported serious instances of abuse experienced by blind students in the higher education context.

A particular problem that is exposed in research studies is that residence managers frequently lack understanding of the social consequences of being disabled, which distorts their perception of persons with disabilities. Therefore, in conjunction with the many shortcomings in the design of buildings, ignorance on the part of university authorities may equally affect the services provided to students with disabilities. According to Matshedisho (2010, p. 743), there seems to be confusion as to whose responsibility it is to deal with students with disabilities, and the consequence is "that assistance to these students is treated as an act of benevolence". Against this backdrop, the acquisition of competency skills and the ongoing development of residential staff are important if the welfare of students living in residences is taken seriously. Dunn and Dunkel (2013) suggest that residential staff needs to acquire specific administrative, communicative and foundational knowledge in line with international standards.

Theoretical Approach

A key issue in disability research is "to put insider experience at the centre of how we understand and think about disability issues" (Swartz, 2014, p. 2). In its philosophical positioning towards students with disabilities, this study therefore adopted a phenomenological approach by focusing on the lived experiences of students with disabilities and drawing meaning from their narratives (Groenewald, 2004; Van Manen, 2007). This approach was appropriate for an exploration of how students with disabilities understood and made meaning of their experiences in a university residence and for addressing the research question that queried what it meant to be a student with a physical disability living in a university residence.

Conceptual Framework: Resilience

Resilience is defined as "the potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using internal and external resources in response to different contextual and developmental challenges" (Pooley & Cohen, 2010, p. 30). Resilience thus refers to the ways in which individuals or groups achieve successful outcomes despite challenging circumstances. Resilience has been scientifically measured using various scales to determine factors such as inner strength, competence, optimism, flexibility, coping effectively when faced with adversity, minimising the impact of stressful life events, and enhancing protective factors such as social support (Abiola & Udofia, 2011). In academic contexts, resilience has been associated with self-efficacy beliefs and adaptive help-seeking (Bandura, 1993). In this study, resilience was identified by the participants themselves when they illuminated the ways in which they responded to the challenges of residence life.
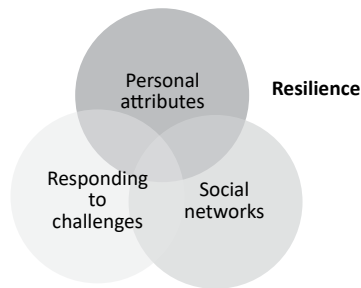
Figure 1: Conceptual framework – resilience factors

The concept of resilience can be clustered into three broad areas: (1) personal attributes (e.g. self-efficacy beliefs); (2) ways in which the student responds to challenges (e.g. with optimism and flexibility); and (3) the extent to which the student has a network of supportive peers, family and others (e.g. a disability representative). These three concepts were found to be interlinked as they all contributed to the resilience of students with disabilities who lived in a university residence.

Methodology for Understanding the Lived Experiences of Students with Disabilities

Phenomenology as a research methodology has two main components: '*epoché*', which refers to the process in which the researcher attempts to open herself to the interviewees' experiences in a pre-reflective way; and 'reduction', which is the process in which the researcher reflects on the experiences of the study participants for the purpose of meaning-making and analysis (Van Manen, 2007). The tool that was used to enter into the lived experiences of the participants was semi-structured interviews. The students were thus able to share their authentic experiences of university residences with the researcher, who subsequently reflected on the interview transcripts to interpret and make sense of the students' lived experiences through "delineating units of meaning" and "clustering of units of meaning to form themes" (Groenewald, 2004). The units of meaning and clustering of these units illuminated the resilience indicators as identified in the literature through the students' experiences as communicated during the interviews.

Sampling

In light of the small number of students with disabilities enrolled at the university under study, the sample comprised three wheelchair users and four students with dwarfism. Of the seven participants, only one was a male. In the absence of a Disability Unit at the university, the students were identified with the assistance of the Student Counselling unit. Consent was obtained from all seven participating students. It is acknowledged that disability takes many different forms, but students with other forms of disability did not form part of this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the participating students. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the interview transcripts were then studied and coded to reveal both the common themes emerging across the seven interviews and the differences amongst the students' experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are important in a research study involving marginalised communities (Danaher, Cook, Danaher, Coombes & Danaher, 2013). Permission to conduct the study was granted by the University and an informed consent form was signed by each participant. Extreme care was taken to respect the rights of the participants and to conduct the interviews at a location and time that were most convenient for them. Conducting most of the interviews in the residences further enhanced the researcher's ability to be present in their lived worlds. The consent form was formulated to inform the participants of the purpose of the study and it explicitly indicated their rights, such as the right to withdraw from the study at any time should they feel uncomfortable.

Data Analysis

Based on the literature review, the research data were grouped into three broad themes as evidence of resilience: (1) personal factors; (2) ways of responding to challenges; and (3) the availability and utilisation of social networks.

Optimism, self-efficacy beliefs and competence

A student's experiences of residence life are strongly influenced by his or her background (Kumpfer, 1995). The students who had experienced independence before (e.g. they had been in a boarding school) were more likely to cope as they had a more positive attitude and enjoyed residence life. The participants' responses highlighted the importance of optimism for successful adaptation to living in a residence. One student explained:

> As much as university life is challenging, it is quite a good experience where you live with strangers, learning to understand and coping with different characters. I never thought living in a residence will be like a normal life. People in the residence are receptive. It exposes you in different ways and [you] enjoy being a young person.   (Student 1)

Another student commented on how self-efficacy belief enabled a positive and optimistic outlook:

> I was not scared to come to the university especially staying in the residence but I had that concern that it will not be the same as in the special school, since there we all had some sort of disability. But I had told myself that I would cope with whatever I encountered. I am now fine, because I have friends as well.   (Student 2)

A sense of self-efficacy is important in adapting to a challenging environment as it encourages perseverance and self-worth (Bandura, 1993; Bergen, 2013). This is also an important attitude in developing one's independence as one grows into adulthood.

Coping effectively when faced with adversity

Students with disabilities face challenges on a daily basis. These challenges range from access to bathing facilities to access to laundry facilities and life-supporting necessities such as regular meals. Poorly designed residence infrastructure makes it difficult for students with disabilities to access essential facilities, which was a point that was elucidated by one of the participants:

> The kitchen is on a floor above [my room] which is accessed through stairs and there is only one café which caters for all students in the university. This is outside the block and there are no shelters leading to it in case of rainy weather. When I first came here in my first year, I got sick because my daily diet was bread and 'vetkoekies'. I had a serious constipation problem and I had to see the doctor. My main challenge, I was in a boarding school before and meals were prepared for us and at home I do not cook at all. This forced me to do an illegal thing of cooking in the room. Stoves are prohibited in the residence but under these circumstances, it is the only way to survive.   (Student 3)

The student's disclosure that she resorted to cooking in her bedroom despite the risks illustrated flexibility as a characteristic of resilience. It also elucidated risk–taking as an element for survival. This finding is also in line with DHET (2015) where it was found that malnutrition is a concern for some students living in university residences.

Many of the challenges experienced by the participants were common to most students, but some affected students with disabilities in particular because of the nature of their disability. Their coping strategies, the adaptation period, and the required skills to survive were therefore also different. Nonetheless, all the participants showed resilience and were able to cope in their respective environments, which is a finding that corroborated a finding by Bergan (2013).

It was found that strategies to reduce stress were essential and that devising flexible methods to solve problems alleviated the impact of adversities. One student demonstrated admirable resilience in her flexible response to the challenge of finding a quiet space and a suitable time to study:

> Our computer laboratory is just a study hall since computers have never worked in that laboratory. We bring our own laptops and that is why having a security [guard] is important. Studying in the residence is not easy; students make noise and it becomes difficult to concentrate. Our computer laboratory is noisy sometimes as other students use it for group meetings. There is a lack of control in that space. I prefer to study from midnight when it is mostly quiet. It is easy for me that way because I attend [classes] in the evening. I do not have to wake up early in the morning. I mostly do my group projects in the computer laboratory during the day [as] it is quite convenient.   (Student 4)

Adaptive help–seeking and social networks

Resilience is associated with a supportive social environment, the ability to effectively utilise social networks and social media, and the willingness to access these. The participants also acknowledged the significant role played by their roommates, management officials, and other supportive people in their lives. The findings showed that resilience was about negotiating their space with others. The participants first had to understand their own capabilities and then they had to make others aware of their strengths, and thus they could work collaboratively with others to achieve positive outcomes. Supportive social networks helped them to buffer their stressors and enabled them to navigate difficult conditions in their respective residences.

One student explained how he called on his social network to help him solve his laundry problem:

> When I came here I was seriously worried about how I would get my laundry done. The first two weeks at the beginning of the year was tough. My cousin used to come and fetch it to do it at his house in the men's hostel nearby, until a student counsellor referred me to a person who would do it. It was a great relief, and in that case I have not encountered any [further] problems. I can now concentrate on other things.   (Student 5)

He further explained how he and his roommate had come to an effective working arrangement, to the point where official assistance became unnecessary:

> My muscles are weak which gives me a challenge in doing some of the things in the room. My roommate is like a brother to me, he completely understands my condition and allows me to do things on my own. He only assists me when I need help. We have an arrangement: he volunteered to prepare meals so we put money together for our groceries. The university offered to give me someone to assist in this regard; however, I prefer this arrangement I have with my roommate.   (Student 5)

Another study participant also explained how her roommate was important for her emotional and academic well–being:

> I wish I could stay with the same person next year. We click like that; we share responsibilities in the room and our personalities complement each other. We have fun together and when it's study time, we focus on our studies. We respect each other's space.   (Student 6)

However, not all the participants had positive relationships with their roommates. One student described some of the difficulties she encountered in this regard:

> My roommate and I had a similar disability and thus we could not assist each other. For instance, a simple thing like opening and closing windows was a challenge and we relied on a next-door roommate to assist us or we used a chair to stand on. That came with other risks as my roommate fell off the chair. My roommate had a personality challenge which affected our relationship. We spent most of the time not speaking as she was very moody.

> When she cleaned she would clean just her side of the room, which was very strange. The worst part was that she would bring her friends to the room or play her music loudly when she knew it was my test week. It was difficult for me to concentrate. I decided to spend more time in my [other] friend's room to avoid her. She was a senior student and treated me as if she was a landlord and I was a tenant in her property.   (Student 7)

Distress was thus caused by a roommate and the residence managers who did not understand the difficulties that two similarly disabled but differently aged students would experience when sharing a room. However, the more junior student was able to draw on her social network for support and peace.

Positive adaptation like the example above calls for both emotional and social intelligence, which are forms of intelligence that ultimately shape behaviour and attitude (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000). Clearly, life in a residence is not only difficult for students with disabilities, but it also requires continuous harmony, mutual assistance and sharing. Unfortunately, these did not always happen for the participating students.

Even resilient people have bad days

The literature often depicts resilience as a simple, stable trajectory (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter–Brick & Yehuda, 2014), but because resilience is a dynamic process (Luthar et al., 2000) it is natural that there will be times when students experience difficulties and feel overwhelmed or isolated. Without consistent support a student may regress, withdraw or drop out, as was the case with Student 3:

> I was living on a floor with non–disabled students. It was not easy at all, as I felt different from everybody. As much as no one said anything bad, I could feel that some students had unanswered questions about me. The worst part was that the chairperson of the students with disabilities did not have my contact. I was not added on their social media list. I was left out of all engagements of students with disabilities. They normally go door to door when they organise meetings or workshops but since I was on another floor I was not informed.

A shortcoming of the resilience theory is that it does not take into account that students with disabilities may at times feel excluded or depressed or wish to give up. As Student 3 indicated, careless exclusion on the part of the institution can cause an otherwise resilient student, who might normally cope well with difficulties, to feel marginalised and excluded.

One respondent encountered serious and ultimately intolerable disrespect as fellow residents exhibited her disability on social media:

> I couldn't take it; it was so humiliating [that] I decided to drop out. I reported the matter but people had already seen my pictures on Facebook. My performance dropped terribly after that incident. When I came back after two years, I decided I would never stay in the residence. I now stay in the township. It is not easy, but I have peace of mind.   (Student 7)

Student 7 was mocked and challenged to the point where she dropped out, but she showed enormous strength of character and resilience by making the difficult decision to continue with her studies.

Conclusion

This study focused on the lived experiences of students with disabilities in university residences and revealed that improvements in residence accommodation are of paramount importance if the principle of inclusivity in tertiary education is to be taken seriously. How students with disabilities overcame the difficulties they experienced was addressed through the resilience lens, and it was revealed that resilience supported these students to build on their strengths and to mitigate most potentially harmful consequences of residence life. However, the resilience of these students was often challenged, and the findings thus suggest that even resilient students may temporarily or permanently regress and succumb to adversity, depending on the severity of the challenges they experience.

The study established the importance of incorporating universal design standards for residence accommodation that will support and affirm diversity. Only through appropriate provisioning will students with disabilities be fully incorporated into university and residence life. The findings further highlight the need for residence managers to be trained in the social model of disability so that they will understand the resilience and capabilities of students with disabilities. An inevitable recommendation emanating from the study is thus that residence managers need to be more vigilant in preventing negative experiences for students with disabilities which, in some instances, were caused by poor communication. All members of residence communities at universities need empathy. Thus, knowledge and understanding of diversity in all university residences is a requirement so that role-players will understand the potential impact that their actions may have on vulnerable others.

Moreover, the study revealed several areas in which practices pertaining to university residences and the position of students with disabilities failed to comply with legislation. The study thus revealed undeniably that much work needs to done to support and affirm the presence of students with disabilities in residences and at universities in general. Further research is needed on the issue of non-compliance with legislative directions and on the root causes of incompatibility and difficulties in residence relationships. Given the daily challenges that students with disabilities face and overcome in higher education settings, they have much to offer as fully-fledged members of a diverse community of learners.

It is acknowledged that the study did not look at the role technology could play in safeguarding the lives of resident students, thus further studies are required to explore the use of advanced technology as a means of improving the lives of students who live in residences.

Conflict of Interest

I have no affiliation with any organisation or entity with financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter discussed in this article.

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