

NEET and resilient: The lived experiences of a sample of South African emerging adults

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There is scant understanding of what supports African emerging adults who are not in employment, education or training (i.e., NEET) to show resilience to NEET-related challenges. This article narrows that gap by reporting an iterative phenomenological study with nine African emerging adults (mean age: 23.44; 66% female) who were NEET for the 18-month duration of the study and living in a resource-constrained community in South Africa. We interviewed each young person three times (June 2021; December 2021; June 2022). A reflexive thematic analysis of these interview transcripts showed that being NEET is a multifaceted challenge. Supported by a mix of personal, relational and environmental resources, young people managed this challenge by resisting or recuperating from destructive coping mechanisms and believing in a successful future self. These findings point to the importance of young people and their social ecologies (families, peers, service providers and policymakers) recognising and enacting their co-responsibility for resilience to the compound challenges of being NEET.

Keywords: African youth; Multisystemic resilience; Not in employment, Education or training; Qualitative.

At least one in five young people living in Africa is not in employment, education or training (NEET; Lars, 2022). This high incidence translates into the likelihood that Africa will not realise Sustainable Development Goal 8.6 that sought to reduce global NEET incidence (Cieslik et al., 2022). The incidence is even worse in South Africa (SA) where one in three youth is NEET (StatsSA, 2022). Being NEET is stressful and associated with sub-optimal development, psychological distress and penury (De Lannoy & Basic Package of Support Research Consortium, 2019; Garman et al., 2022; O’Dea et al., 2014).

Although there is a burgeoning interest in the resilience (i.e., capacity to respond adaptively to significant stress; Masten, 2014) of African young people exposed to significant risk (Theron, 2023), few have considered what might support the resilience of African youth who are NEET. We remedy this oversight by reporting a qualitative study ($n = 57$) with African emerging adults

living in a resource-constrained township in SA. While at least a third of these young people were NEET at some point in the study, nine remained NEET for the study’s 18-month duration (2021–2022). On three occasions, spaced 6 months apart, these young people explained their lived experience of resilience to NEET-related challenges. Their insights inform this paper.

While being NEET is not limited to emerging adults, being disengaged from employment, education or training is particularly problematic during emerging adulthood, especially when the period of being NEET is protracted (Su et al., 2022). One key milestone of emerging adulthood is financial independence and related capacity to achieve typical social markers of adulthood (e.g., own or rent own accommodation or commit to a long-term relationship) (Arnett, 2000). Being NEET, either for longer periods or repeatedly, jeopardises the realisation of this developmental milestone, prompting depression, despair,

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criminal activity, transactional sex and/or substance abuse (Baldry et al., 2019) and social exclusion (Mudiriza & de Lannoy, 2023). Supporting youth to overcome these challenges requires understanding of the multisystemic resources that enable their resilience to NEET-related stress, especially longer-term NEET-hood.

A multisystemic resilience framework

Early resilience theories emphasised personal strengths in explanations of young people's capacity to respond adaptively to significant stress, thereby placing the responsibility for resilience on individuals and furthering neoliberal agendas (Masten, 2014). While subsequent explanations were less narrow (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016; Ungar, 2011), they typically accentuated the role of social ecologies (e.g., families or communities) in youth resilience. Most recently, resilience researchers have advocated for multisystemic explanations of youth resilience that acknowledge the role of multiple systems in why and how young people respond adaptively (Masten et al., 2021, 2023; Ungar, 2018, 2021; Ungar & Theron, 2020), with express acknowledgement that qualitative data are important to gaining deep understandings of the interacting multisystem resources that enable adaptive responses (Masten et al., 2023; Ungar et al., 2023).

Understood multisystemically, which is the framework informing this paper, youth resilience draws on a combination of resources, including physical, psychological, social, institutional and environmental ones (Masten et al., 2021; Ungar & Theron, 2020). For instance, a study with 233 African youth (M_{age} : 24.63) found that their resilience to COVID-related challenges was typically co-facilitated by a mix of psychological strengths (e.g., agency and hopeful meaning making), social supports (e.g., caring family and supportive peers), and environmental resources (e.g., places to exercise and spaces to garden/sustain household livelihood) (Theron & Ungar, 2023). Such multisystemic understandings of resilience have diminished enthusiasm for personal strengths narratives, as they perpetuate the misunderstanding that resilience requires only/mostly psychological ruggedness (Masten, 2014).

Resilience to NEET-related stress: A neglected focus

A review of 2000–2018 African studies ($n = 59$) on child and youth resilience did not mention youth who were NEET (Theron, 2023). Similarly, a review by Van Breda and Theron (2018) covering 61 articles about the resilience of South African children and youth included just one study that discussed NEET youth participants ($n = 52$; aged 16–21; 94% male; 51% African; Van Breda & Dickens, 2017). However, this study did not explain

how resilience was fostered in NEET youth but focused on what protected residential care leavers from becoming NEET. The study found that teamwork, relational resources, and environmental support protected young individuals from NEET status.

Baldry et al. (2019) synthesised their 12 qualitative studies examining the resilience of South African NEET youth, emphasising personal agency alongside other resources like supportive households and accessible training programmes. Similarly, Matli and Ngoepe (2021) acknowledged the protective value of NEET youth taking action to change their status, although their study was not centred on resilience.

Beyond Africa, scant research on the adaptive responses of NEET youth exists. Exceptions include studies involving 15 low-skilled Italian adults (Tomassini, 2016), 50,000 Norwegian individuals aged 16–29 (Ballo et al., 2022), 14,694 English youth (Cahill et al., 2022) and key informants from Italy, Greece, Spain and Cyprus (Kapitsinis et al., 2022). These studies point to factors supporting NEET resilience across various domains: individual (e.g., cognitive skills, self-worth, drive to learn/acquire employment), family (e.g., material support, quality sibling relationships), community (e.g., positive schooling experiences, early employment opportunities), and regional context (e.g., industrial development, enabling policies). Although none of these studies fully delineated a combined multisystemic set of protective resources, their findings collectively contribute to understanding the resilience of NEET youth.

The current study

To advance deep understanding of the multisystemic resource combinations that matter for youth resilience to NEET-related challenges over time, we worked qualitatively and iteratively with a sample of African emerging adults living in a resource-constrained township in Mpumalanga province. Our study was guided by two questions: how do African emerging adults explain the challenges of NEET-hood? What are their lived experiences of resilience to these challenges and how is this resilience multisystemic?

METHOD

The data that we report on are drawn from a British Academy-funded follow-up study to the Resilient Youth in Stressed Environments (RYSE) study. As explained in Ungar et al. (2021), RYSE investigated the multisystemic factors associated with positive outcomes (e.g., minimal symptoms of depression) among 14–24-year-olds living in communities stressed by economic, social or environmental risks. The follow-up study, which was qualitative and restricted to emerging adults in

the South African RYSE sample, aimed to develop a deeper understanding of these factors. Emerging adults are under-represented in resilience studies, more especially in Africa (Theron, 2023), and “qualitative data” are important to understanding “multisystem patterns of interaction within and across human brains, bodies, minds, relationships, and social communities” (Masten et al., 2023, p. 2104).

Research design

Our qualitative study was rooted in a partially interpretivist approach. Specifically, this meant that we accounted for context as fluid and fundamental to our growing “thick” and rich understanding of the individual experiences and perspectives of our participants (Cohen et al., 2017; Geertz, 1977). Relatedly, we followed an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA). IPA allowed us to “describe ... participants’ experiences” (Tuohy et al., 2013) of what enabled their resilience and to “understand and interpret participants’ experiences” (Tuohy et al., 2013), through the lens of a multisystemic resilience. We understand our theoretical underpinning (namely multisystemic resilience) as comprising a diverse set of meanings, rather than a reflection of a collective reality, and this is reflected in our Findings and Discussion.

Reflexivity

Following Levitt et al. (2018), we acknowledge the importance of researcher transparency. Our 25-year-long engagement in the study of African youth resilience sensitised us to the complex multiplicity of supports that are implicit in young people’s positive adaptation to significant stress. Simultaneously, as privileged adult women, we knew our life experiences set us apart from our participants. For this reason, we invited African master’s psychology students who were closer in age and experience to the participants (including having grown up in similarly resource-constrained contexts), to facilitate the data generation. We mentored the interview process through regular check-in and debriefing sessions. While it is possible that the students’ academic success could have limited participant openness, the transcripts (which were mostly lengthy and included sensitive content and moments of shared humour) suggested otherwise, as did participants’ continued engagement in the study.

Ethics

The Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee and Faculty of Education Ethics Committee, University of Pretoria, provided ethical clearance for the RYSE study (UP17/05/01). The University of Leicester

Criminology and Education Ethics Committee provided aligned clearance (26759-dtl6-ss). Emerging adult participants provided written consent for the RYSE study and informed verbal consent (via telephone call) for the follow-up. The verbal consent process was necessitated by the follow-up study commencing during COVID-19-related lockdown and related restrictions on in-person research. Three trained research assistants (RAs; Educational Psychology master’s degree students) explained the follow-up study to the participants, emphasising that participation was voluntary, before recording the verbal consents and uploading them to a password-protected cloud-based folder. Participants received a supermarket e-voucher (value approximately \$20) for each completed interview.

Participants

The RYSE study included 572 participants from SA aged 14–24; of these, 312 were emerging adults (18–24-year-olds) living in a resource-constrained municipality challenged by violent crime and environmental degradation. Under 18-year-olds from resource-constrained households in this community (and elsewhere in SA) are eligible for the Child Support Grant (monthly cash transfer to caregiver, ZAR480/child [approximately \$20]; Hall, 2023). Many families associate this support with increased dignity and autonomy (Granlund & Hochfeld, 2020).

As part of the RYSE survey, participants self-reported symptoms of depression using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II, Beck et al., 1996). The symptoms are scored; total scores denote symptom severity using specific score ranges (i.e., minimal [0–13], mild [14–19], moderate [20–28] or severe [29–63]). As in other resilience studies (e.g., Bonanno, 2004, 2021; Galatzer-Levy et al., 2018; Theron & Hölte., 2023), minimal symptoms of depression were interpreted as a positive outcome in the face of significant stress (i.e., as evidence of resilience). For the current study, the RAs invited participation from emerging adult RYSE participants who had consented to follow-up and reported minimal levels of depression ($n = 60$). Fifty-seven accepted the invitation. Most self-identified as young women ($n = 31$); all self-identified as Black/African. Nine reported being NEET across the duration of our study; their insights are the focus of this article. Their ages ranged from 21 to 26 (mean age: 23.44). Most ($n = 6$) were young women. At the time of our study, eight lived with immediate or extended family. One lived with an intimate partner.

Data generation

The RAs conducted three telephonic, semi-structured interviews with each participant (May–June, 2021;

November–December, 2021; May–June, 2022). The interview questions focused on experiences of risk and resilience (e.g., what makes life hard for you/young people living in your community? What helps you/young people to be OK/do OK when life is hard? Can you give me an example of how [factor mentioned by participant] helps you/young people to be OK/do OK?).

The RAs conducted the interviews in English, but participants were free to use their mother tongue (typically isiZulu or Sesotho; the RAs spoke both). Interviews were arranged to suit participants' schedules; most were 35–40 minutes long. A professional transcription company transcribed the recordings (and, where necessary, translated interview content). The RAs checked and confirmed the transcriptions, before uploading them to a password-protected, cloud-based folder.

Data analysis

We used reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2022). RTA's focus on "participants' contextually situated experiences, perspectives, and behaviors" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 8) fit IPA and embraced our knowledge of youth resilience. Working contemplatively and iteratively, LT identified data that accounted for how African emerging adults experienced NEET-related challenges and resilience to those challenges, labelling this with succinct paraphrases. Regarding resilience to those challenges, LT drew on the multisystemic resilience framework to group similar resources into systemic themes (e.g., all labels relating to young people taking personal action to cope constructively with NEET-hood were linked to a theme of personal agency). LT identified

two core, co-facilitated processes across these themes that were key to young people's resilience (i.e., countering destructive coping mechanisms; being future oriented). LT shared the analysis with DL and SH. After reflecting on the analysis, and revisiting the data, they endorsed it.

Trustworthiness

Throughout the process of familiarising ourselves with the data and analysing it, we had regular check-ins with the RAs; this helped root our understanding of the transcripts in the participants' lived realities. In 2023, we also met with available participants ($n = 22$) and invited them to reflect on our understanding of what enabled their resilience. This group included five of the NEET participants; their reflections confirmed our interpretation and emphasised the importance of self and family to youth resilience.

FINDINGS

As summarised in Figure 1, young people who were NEET for the duration of the study (mid-2021 until mid-2022) were unequivocal about the multifaceted challenge of being NEET (Theme 1). They managed this challenge using two core capacities: (a) resisting or recuperating from destructive coping mechanisms (Theme 2), and (b) believing in a successful future self (Theme 3). As represented by the icons in Figure 1, each capacity was co-facilitated by a mix of resources, including personal, relational and environmental ones. We detail these challenges and young people's resilient responses to them next.

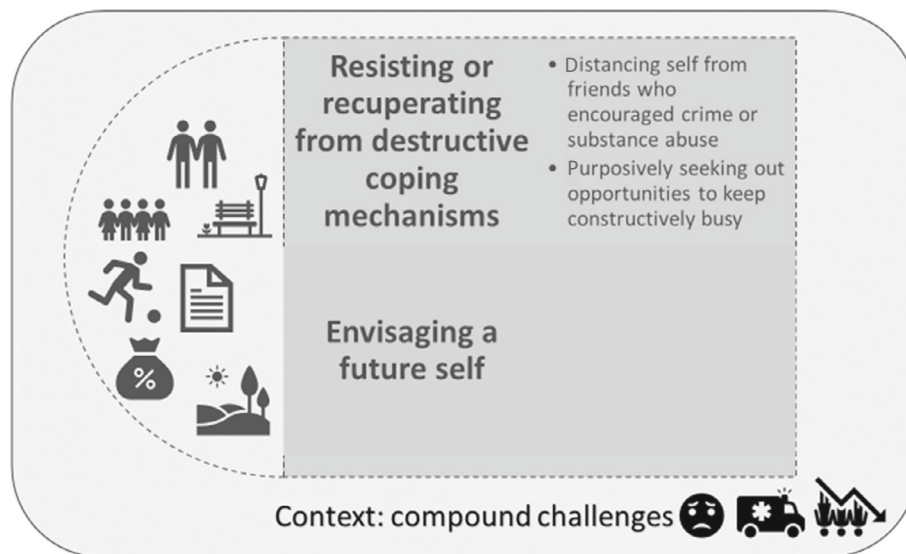


Figure 1. Summary of findings. *Note:* The icons associated with the resilience themes (resisting or recuperating from destructive coping mechanisms; envisaging a future self) denote social support (e.g., family members, intimate partners, trustworthy friends and community members) and ecological resources (e.g., recreational spaces, safe communal places and spaces for entrepreneurial activity).

Being NEET is a compound challenge

Significant risk is a precondition for resilience (Masten, 2014). As explained by young people, being NEET constituted significant risk comprising multiple challenges. Scarce employment was a key challenge: “There are no jobs; life is hard” (Thuli, 24-year-old woman); “there are lots of us who are sitting and not working. Some ... have been sitting for years and they have even given up hope” (Lindiwe, 23-year-old woman). All other participants made similar comments, with some also referring to the financial obstacles to engaging in education and training opportunities. For instance, Thabo (24-year-old man) related,

I had four friends at school, they are now far in life, they are studying. They're always calling me, like, “We are studying, we want you to come and join us” ... So, it's hard to tell them that, “Guy's, I'm not financially good, because I am struggling. I have a child and I also have to pay rent.”

In participants' experience, nepotism and not being well-connected further reduced their chances of finding employment/training opportunities. Sandile (24-year-old man) said, “You need to know someone in that company and then you can get a job ... if you don't have money for a bribe, then it means that you won't get a job”.

These challenges had spill-over effects. All participants associated being NEET with financial precarity, hopelessness and low self-esteem. For example, Precious (23-year-old woman) said, “Unemployment, yeah, it's a long-term stress for me. To be dependent on people you feel like baggage. Like you're bothering them. ... you feel small.” Similarly, Lindiwe (23-year-old woman) recounted how “harsh words” in response to her “ask[ing] for things” resulted in her “thinking things like maybe this means that I don't deserve to have this life”. Milli (23-year-old woman) recounted, “It is so hard to get a job ... hustling for a job killed me emotionally.” While short-term employment mitigated some of these spillover effects, they recurred when that employment ended. Xenga (23-year-old woman) related:

I got a job ... I was happy. But I lost the job ... back to the normal boring life of sitting at home ... I knew that it was only for a month, but they promised that if you work hard ... they will take us for more training and more jobs. But since then, no call from them, nothing ... it's so depressing.

Another spillover effect was “wrong things” (Thabo, 24-year-old man), or maladaptive coping mechanisms. Typically, these included criminal activity, transactional sexual relationships, and/or substance use:

A lot of youth in eMbalenhle are not working ... some are not able to afford the things that they need, so they

turn to crime and some turn to dating older men. (Precious, 23-year-old woman)

It's hard because there are no jobs ... being home is boring ... you end up getting into drugs ... you get some bad friends. (Sandile, 24-year-old man)

There is no jobs, there's a lot of crime ... it depresses young people a lot ... they end up doing wrong things, committing crime, just to get money (Xenga, 23-year-old woman)

I cannot find a job ... I sleep a lot ... [to cope] we were always drunk (Khuthatso, 21-year-old man)

In summary, being NEET was invariably a systemic challenge (i.e., too few opportunities for education or employment, nepotism). This challenged young people's healthy functioning (i.e., young people reported financial dependence, limited aspirations, poor self-esteem, and risk of engaging in crime, substance abuse or transactional sexual relationships). The next two themes detail the multisystemic resource combinations that supported young people to rise to these challenges.

Resisting or recuperating from destructive coping mechanisms: A co-facilitated process

Young people's capacity to avoid or desist from destructive coping mechanisms drew on a mix of resources that was distributed across systems. This mix was part personal agency (distancing themselves from friends who encouraged crime or substance abuse; purposively seeking out opportunities to keep constructively busy); part social support (mostly from family members, intimate partners, trustworthy friends and/or community members); and part ecological resources (recreational spaces or safe communal places that facilitated distance from negative peers and keeping busy). The mix almost never included institutional resources. When it did, this was invariably limited to the monthly child support grant (awarded to participants' siblings or children) or the COVID-relief grant. For instance, Thuli (24-year-old woman) said, “We survive by getting the grant money, because the last born [in her household] is still in school and gets a grant and then our children also get grant money.” Likewise, Vindi (26-year-old woman) spoke of the child-support grant as, “Little money is better than nothing. So, if you get that 400, you know maybe R100 will be yours ... R300 ... maybe buy something for home, then the R200 goes to your child.” The three excerpts that follow illustrate the mix of personal, social

and ecological resources, along with the general absence of institutional supports:

I talk to my pastor, and I tell him about my situation, and he supports me. And my father, he also makes time to listen to me and he also gives me that little money here and there ... and he gives me that push in life ... My girlfriend is always helping me ... she says to me "... Have patience and believe in yourself." ... and another thing is you must join an organisation or soccer team. That thing helps your mind to relax ... I'm always keeping myself busy ... at church, they are making things for the youth. So, youth are busy with something rather than to stay doing nothing (Thabo; 24-year-old man)

They [family] give me money to go and drop off my CVs ... they say you must wait for your time, and you don't need to force it because you end up getting into wrong things (... you go to a blesser [sugar daddy] looking for money) ... I also removed myself from a lot of friendships ... I am trying to do something with my life ... if there is a job ... even for a month, then I will take it ... Something that helped me a lot was church ... when you are in church, you're not thinking about your own issues. You are happy ... you even forget that you are unemployed. (Lindiwe; 23-year-old woman)

Playing sports [helps] because you pass the time ... or the gym. When you're busy ... you can avoid things like being a thief ... and bad friends ... I noticed that I will not progress if I have a lot of [bad] friends. So, I had to start slowly distancing myself from them ... my girlfriend is also someone that I speak to ... she always tells me that I will be okay ... my grandmother, she was also advising me and when people were looking for me here at home, she would never hide me. Even when I did something wrong, she would tell them that I am at home ... now I don't do anything wrong. I don't do house break-ins anymore. (Sandile; 24-year-old man)

Future self: A patient, co-facilitated pursuit

Young people's resilience to the compound challenges of being NEET also included the capacity to envisage a successful future for themselves and to be patient while that future materialised. To illustrate: "What helps me to be OK is just knowing that there is light at the end of the tunnel. I will make it someday." (Precious, 23-year-old woman); "I will move on, one day" (Khuthatso; 21-year-old man); and "Look at your situation and accept that for now it's not happening, but my future is bright" (Lindiwe, 23-year-old woman). As in the previous theme, this capacity to be patiently

future-oriented drew on a mix of resources that was part personal agency (engaging in entrepreneurial activity); part social support (encouraging family and friends; locals support for entrepreneurial activity); and/or part ecological resources (spaces and places that facilitated hustling and hope). The excerpts that follow, illustrate this personal-social-ecological mix:

I get stressed because I do not work [formally]. I needed to make a plan to get money [he hawks sweets on a downtown sidewalk] ... my customers are supportive. They always give me hope that one day things will be better (Khuthatso, 21-year-old man)

Not that I'm just sitting at home ... I'm selling that cockroach killing powder for fifty rand (around \$2) ... at least I'm doing something for myself and it's promising ... and I am going to church – it's giving me hope that things will change, someday ... my friend sometimes borrows me money and we go to church together – I'm grateful that I'm having a friend like that, someone I can talk to (Vindi; 26-year-old woman)

I think, 'I will get there one day'. So, as time went by, I endured and risked it: I have a trampoline that I put in the park and the kids come and jump and they pay R2 [about US20c] (Sandile, 24-year-old man)

While there was iterative reference to family, friends, customers and other community members sustaining young people's hope for a transformed future, there was scant reference to the hope-promoting example of peers who had found employment. One exception was Xenga (23-year-old woman) who said, "When you see people getting jobs, it makes me feel okay. It makes me feel better because at least some people are getting it ... it motivates me". There was also little reference to formal opportunities to learn entrepreneurial and other skills that would advance young people's chances of securing a better future. Instead, Precious (23-year-old woman) recommended that such opportunities be provided, "Maybe career guidance classes ... or maybe a program or a workshop ... so yes, some encouragement would help".

DISCUSSION

Drawing on iterative qualitative data generated by nine young Africans who were NEET for the 18-month duration of our study, this paper answers two questions: how do African emerging adults explain the challenges of NEET-hood? What are their lived experiences of resilience to these challenges and how is this resilience multisystemic? While there is scant attention to what supports resilience to NEET-hood in Minority World countries (i.e., the UK and Europe; Ballo et al., 2022; Cahill

et al., 2022; Kapitsinis et al., 2022; Tomassini, 2016), this attention is even scantier in the Majority World (Baldry et al., 2019; Matli & Ngoepe, 2021). Such inattention is problematic, given that most of the world's youth (including most NEET youth) live in the Majority World. Our study redresses the relative inattention to the resilience of young people who are NEET in the Majority World, more especially when the period of NEET-hood is protracted. In so doing, we contribute insights that should enable policy makers and service providers to better support Majority World NEETs to show resilience.

Starting with the first question, our study contributes increased understanding of how the systems that surround young people can/should support them. Specifically, from the perspective of African young people who are NEET, we understand that there is a need to create and sustain systems that can be adaptive to the needs of the moment, whether those be social, familial, structural or financial. As reported by others (Baldry et al., 2019; Garman et al., 2022), the challenges of being NEET go beyond monetary deprivation. While young people in our study bemoaned their lack of financial independence, they also reported psychological distress and vulnerability to maladaptive coping mechanisms (including criminal activity, substance abuse, and transactional sex). Their lived experience of NEET-hood as a compound challenge that is driven by structural deprivations (Mudiriza & de Lannoy, 2023), calls for similarly multifaceted interventions that go beyond fiscal support (De Lannoy & Mudiriza, 2019). Our findings also point to the importance of educating families and communities to recognise and avoid comments/behaviours that could stigmatise or discourage NEETs.

Moving to the second question, and aligned with multisystemic understandings of resilience (Masten et al., 2021; Ungar & Theron, 2020), our study underscores that resilience to NEET-hood transcends individual accountability. This is an important contribution, given that many societies misinterpret resilience as a personal responsibility, thereby furthering neoliberal agendas that add to the distress of those who are vulnerable (Chandler & Reid, 2016). While personal agency supported youth in our study (and prior studies; Cahill et al., 2022; Matli & Ngoepe, 2021; Tomassini, 2016) to overcome the challenges of NEET-hood, their resilience was simultaneously enabled by the social and ecological systems they were connected to (i.e., emotional and instrumental support from families, friends, community members; spaces/places to exercise agency and meet with others). Although there is some mention of relational supports in studies of NEETs' resilience (ibid.), these prior studies have neither reported spaces/places nor explained resilience as rooted in a mix of resources (i.e., co-occurring personal, relational, and environmental supports). Our findings' emphasis on the *combined* value of personal, relational, and environmental supports directs

researcher, service provider, practitioner and policy maker attention to combinations of resources and how best to facilitate NEETs' access to such resilience-enabling resource combinations.

Our study also nudges attention to a dearth of institutional and structural support. Apart from brief mentions of survival-gear cash transfers like the Child Support Grant and fleeting training/employment experiences, our participants were silent about structural support. This differs from previous research highlighting the crucial role of positive education, learning/employment chances and youth-oriented policies in fostering NEET resilience (Baldry et al., 2019; Ballo et al., 2022; Kapitsinis et al., 2022; Tomassini, 2016). While limited participant awareness about training opportunities is possible, it's more likely that their residence in a resource-poor community hindered access (as also seen in other South African communities; Baldry et al., 2019). Without structural support (training/employment prospects, mental health services to address depression; de Lannoy, personal communication, August 16, 2023), young NEETs may remain trapped in the cycle of NEET-associated struggles.

While Van Breda and Dickens (2017) did not study NEETs' resilience, their discovery that personal skills, relationships, and community supports prevented African youth from becoming NEET holds significance. This underscores that evading NEET status hinges on a blend of capabilities. Likewise, if NEET-hood is not avoided, our study shows that a mix of personal, relational and environmental supports is key to young people managing the many challenges that NEET-hood imposes. In the context of Africa, with its large population of NEETs (Lars, 2022), provision of a resource mix is non-negotiable if youth resilience is to be advanced.

Limitations

Our sample ($n = 9$) was modest. Even though this was offset by multiple (three) interviews with each participant over the course of 18 months, a larger number of participants could have diversified the mix of resources we report. Similarly, our sample was biased by its rootedness in the RYSE study and purposeful selection of young people reporting minimal symptoms of depression. Young people who report more elevated symptoms of depression also have valuable insights. Had we included them and explored how they account for resilience, we would have gained other valuable insights including, perhaps, that they typically do not have access to a mix of resources (Theron & Ungar., 2023).

Conclusion

Resilience to NEET-hood is more than personal agency. Instead, and as explained by African emerging adults in our study, it requires a combination of personal volition,

relational supports, spaces and places for entrepreneurial activity and relaxation, and structural supports. While structural supports will require purposeful government impetus, the quotidian nature of the other supports identified by our youth participants suggests that emerging adult resilience to NEET-hood is doable. Its do-ability, however, hinges on young people and their social networks, service providers, and policymakers recognising and enacting their co-responsibility for providing and sustaining a resource mix that is responsive to the multiplicity of NEET-related challenges.

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