

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From primary agents to corporate actors: A morphogenetic analysis of student becoming through a university residential education and support programme during the COVID-19 pandemic

Van primêre agente tot korporatiewe akteurs: 'n Morfogetetiese analise van studentewording deur middel van 'n universiteits residensiële onderwys- en ondersteuningsprogram tydens die COVID-19-pandemie

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the educational becoming of first-generation students was catalysed through their participation in a residential education and support programme (RESP) at Stellenbosch University during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on Margaret Archer's morphogenetic theory, the article traces students' transformation from primary agents to corporate actors, mapping their evolving identities through structural conditioning, sociocultural interaction, and agentic elaboration. Based on a longitudinal ethnographic case study of six students who remained in residence during lockdown, the research examines how the RESP, rooted in dialogical engagement, care ethics, and humanising pedagogy, functioned as a generative space for collective reflexivity, relational learning, and the activation of student agency. The findings demonstrate that the RESP enabled students to reconfigure their sense of self, assume leadership roles, and reshape institutional spaces from the margins. This study contributes to scholarship on intentional residential education practices, student subjectivity, pedagogies of care, and higher education transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. It offers insights into how inclusive and relational educational practices can foster student agency and social transformation, particularly for the historically marginalised within higher education.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic, residential education and support programme (RESP), morphogenesis, agency, epistemic virtues

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OPSOMMING

Hierdie artikel ondersoek hoe die opvoedkundige wording van eerstegenerasiestudente aangehits en ge-aktiveer is deur hul deelname aan 'n Residensiële Onderwys- en Ondersteuningsprogram (RESP) aan die Universiteit Stellenbosch tydens die COVID-19-pandemie. Die studie gebruik Margaret Archer se morfogenetiese teorie om die studente se ontwikkelende identiteite van primêre agente na korporatiewe akteurs, en volg hul transformasie deur die fases van strukturele kondisionering, sosio-kulturele interaksie en agentiese uitbreiding. Die etnografiese gevallestudie van ses studente wat tydens die inperking in die koshuis gebly het, ondersoek hoe die RESP, gefunksioneer het as 'n generatiewe ruimte vir kollektiewe refleksiwiteit, relasionele leer en die aktivering van studente-agentskap. Die RESP – gegrond in dialogiese betrokkenheid, 'n etiek van praktiese sorg en humaniserende pedagogie – se invloed word oor 'n aantal jaar gemeet. Die bevindinge toon dat die RESP studente in staat gestel het om hul gevoel van self te herkonfigureer, leierskapsrolle aan te neem en institusionele ruimtes vanuit die kantlyn te hervorm. Hierdie studie dra by tot die navorsing oor doelbewuste residensiële onderwyspraktyke, studentesubjektiviteit, pedagogieë van sorg en hoër onderwystransformasie in post-apartheid Suid-Afrika. Dit bied insigte in hoe inklusiewe en relasionele onderwyspraktyke studenteagentskap en sosiale transformasie kan bevorder, veral vir diegene wat histories gemarginaliseer is binne hoër onderwys.

SLEUTELWOORDE

COVID-19-pandemie, residensiële onderwys- en ondersteuningsprogram (ROOP), morfogenese, agentskap, epistemiese deugde

Introduction

Higher education is, at its core, an ontological project, one that seeks to impart knowledge and to transform the very being of students by shaping their identities, values, and ways of engaging with the world (Freire, 1978, quoted in Barnett, 2007). It reconfigures how learners come to understand themselves, enabling them to critically locate their existence within broader social, cultural, and ethical contexts, and to act meaningfully within them. Our study explored how this transformation unfolds and whether specific pedagogical approaches can engender and leverage such educational change. In this article, we examine the transformative journeys of a group of first-generation students (FGSs) who participated and co-created the Residential Education and Support Programme (RESP) developed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While higher education holds considerable transformative promise, this potential is not equitably realised by all student populations. Stellenbosch University, as a historically white, Afrikaner higher education institution, continues to carry the cultural residue of its apartheid-era identity. Despite post-apartheid transformation efforts, the university's institutional culture and structures still subtly privilege middle-class, traditionally Afrikaner-positioned students, shaping norms, values, and modes of belonging in ways

that often marginalise first-generation black students (Fataar, 2018, 2019). These students encounter spaces where their social and cultural capital is undervalued, constraining their full participation in the academic and social life of the institution. Within this university context, and forming the focus of this article, the Residential Education and Support Programme (RESP) emerged as a vital intervention, actively unsettling these inherited institutional hierarchies and affirming the diverse cultural wealth students bring to the university (Yosso, 2005).

The RESP was a series of intentionally and informally structured conversational encounters and relational engagements amongst the students who remained in residence from the commencement of the national lockdown. Initially conceived to address the sentient and emotional wellbeing of students and alleviate the acute anxiety and panic the pandemic induced, the RESP evolved into a framework of peer support and personal development that embraces a caring ethos, mutual recognition, and a shared humanity. In a previous article, we discussed how the students who participated in the RESP experienced a sense of recognition and reverence for who they were and how they traversed their aspirational journeys (Petersen & Fataar, 2025).

This article examines the lived experiences of six students who participated in the RESP, aiming to demonstrate how the RESP and the unique conditions of the COVID-19 moment served as a catalyst for the students' agentic development. Drawing on Margaret Archer's (1995) theory of morphogenesis, the study traces how students transitioned from being primary agents, often passive recipients of structural conditions, to corporate actors, capable of changing structures through their collective agency and critical engagement. Moreover, the study outlines the modes of reflexivity that the students applied as they moved through the stages of morphogenesis to reconfigure their identities. The findings suggest that students' agentic capacities were not static but activated and intensified their participation in the RESP through collective care, learning, and action.

The central argument is that programmes like the RESP, that are grounded in ethical care practices and humanising pedagogies, can cultivate students' agency and activate collective action to change and transform outdated, rigid and exclusionary systems. In supportive settings and through dialogical engagements students can reimagine their identities, refine their critical consciousness, and assert their place in broader social and academic spheres.

This article forms part of a longitudinal ethnographic case study that traces the educational trajectories of a purposively selected group of students. It follows their experiences from their initial engagement with the learning and living environment at Stellenbosch University prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, through their participation in the Residential Education and Support Programme (RESP) during the pandemic, and into the subsequent three years. Drawing on qualitative interview and focus group data, the study presents a narrative analysis of the participants' educational pathways and processes of epistemic becoming.

Contextualising the RESP within the pandemic landscape

The COVID-19 pandemic – Overview of the impact on global and local higher education institutions

On 1 April 2020, Unesco reported that 80 countries were in lockdown, affecting 3.4 billion people, which is 43% of the global population. School and university closures disrupted learning for 1.5 billion students, or 89.4% of learners across 185 countries. According to an IAU global survey, by April 2020, 60% of universities were fully closed, 30% partially closed, and 10% operated under containment measures. While many European institutions adopted blended and online learning, only 29% of African HEIs transitioned online despite the continent recording fewer COVID-19 cases, largely due to limited internet and digital access (Marinoni et al., 2020).

The pandemic highlighted stark inequalities among South African higher education institutions (HEIs). The nationwide university closures left little time to adapt to online learning. Czerniewicz et al. (2020) noted that the shift to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTLA) varied widely due to unequal access to digital devices, tech support, and connectivity. At Nelson Mandela University, 35% of students lacked access to a computer or smartphone (Fraser-Moleketi, 2020). Beyond the digital divide, some HEIs lacked the social and institutional capabilities to navigate the crisis, with limited support outside of government, which was focused on COVID-19 mitigation. Van Schalkwyk (2021) found that HEIs with inclusive, context-sensitive leadership were more resilient and adaptive.

A student survey in April 2020 revealed that university closures led to heightened food insecurity, stress, and lack of digital access (Sowetan, 2021). Many students struggled without the infrastructure provided by universities. The university residences had become students' homes and, in many instances, their refuge from the ills of their communities (Czerniewicz et al., 2020, p. 957).

Stellenbosch University responded swiftly to the COVID-19 pandemic by establishing an Institutional Committee for Business Continuity (ICBC), which ensured a coordinated and adaptive institutional strategy. The ICBC played a pivotal operational role in facilitating the transition to online learning, including the prompt distribution of loaned digital devices to students to support equitable access to education.

From a relational aspect, SU's response reflected a unified and compassionate approach, grounded in care ethics (Tronto, 1993), with a focus on sustaining the wellbeing of its academic community. Notably, the university made provision for students unable to return home, offering continued residence with adherence to health protocols.

The Residential Education and Support Programme (RESP)

The focus of this study is on a single university residence where, we argue, a form of deep and caring teaching and learning unfolded. As a response to the physical, emotional, and intellectual needs brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and within the context of acute anxiety, unprecedented uncertainty, and supercomplexity (Barnett, 2007), nine female students, together with a residence educator, co-constructed the Residential Education and Support Programme (RESP). Although the initial impetus for the RESP was to address

immediate concerns and threats caused by the pandemic, the programme gradually evolved into a series of intentionally structured dialogical engagements. These encounters resemble what Waghid (2023, p. 110) terms “deliberative engagements,” where generative dialogue and thoughtful exchange emerge from conditions of uncertainty and doubt. The RESP productively used the volatility of the pandemic moment and re-organised the isolated residence space to make place for cultivating the students’ full humanity, which is understood as socially situated, historically aware, critically reflective, and transformative individuals (Freire, 1972, 1984).

Petersen and Fataar (2025) argued that the constitution of the RESP was grounded in relationality and trust that was built through mutual vulnerability, disclosure, and respect. The programme’s curricular and pedagogical arrangements were dialogically driven, integrating students’ lived realities, cultural knowledges, and identities into their educational experiences through structured discussions, debates, and critical reflection. The RESP espoused a humane and caring pedagogical methodology that reinforced their dignity and ignited the students’ agency. Its pedagogical stance affirmed and validated students’ interests, experiences, and emotions, and localised the curriculum to reflect their social realities (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). In this regard, the RESP modelled inclusive and equitable learning spaces that aligned with Freire’s (1970) call for solidarity, mutual respect, and the co-construction of knowledge.

Furthermore, the RESP espoused the vision of Cammarota and Romero (2006), suggesting that teachers and students share their lived perspectives and urging teachers to express confidence in their students’ intellectual capacities and a develop a genuine concern for their overall wellbeing. The RESP incorporated Noddings’ (1995) ideals for caring teaching by modelling good practices and values, and affirming students’ experiences in dialogue with them. Additionally, the RESP functioned on the ethical values of care as proposed by Tronto (1993), including practising an attentiveness to the needs of others, addressing it responsibly and with competence, and eliciting a responsiveness from the recipients of care.

As such, the RESP represents a mode of education that was deeply relational, context-sensitive, and ethically grounded. It responded to students’ immediate needs and contributed to their longer-term development as critically conscious, empowered individuals committed to building a more just and caring society. Through intentional, ethical care practices and humanising pedagogies, the RESP cultivated meaningful and enduring engagements with knowledge, identity, and social change (Petersen & Fataar, 2025). The students disclosed their acquisition of qualities and dispositions the programme imbued in them, including a newfound willingness to engage, a sense of belief in themselves (confidence), and an awareness of others’ pain and suffering (compassion). The article examines how the RESP shaped the students’ identity formation and the development of their agency.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on Margaret Archer’s Social Realist Theory of morphogenesis (1995, 2007b) to explore the students’ processes of agentic development and educational

becoming. Archer's framework provides a compelling lens to understand how structural, cultural, and agential dimensions interact over time to produce either transformation or stasis. When the actions of institutional structures and agents align, the system tends to reproduce itself in stable patterns, a condition Archer terms morphostasis. However, when misalignment or tension occurs between agents and institutional structures and the cultural context, the potential for transformation arises, what she defines as morphogenesis.

Morphogenesis unfolds as a stratified, cyclical process that moves through three key phases: (1) conditioning, (2) interaction, and (3) elaboration. Initially, social structures condition the environment into which social agents are born or placed. These conditions shape but do not determine, how agents respond to them. Agents can think, reflect, and act on their circumstances. When this reflexive engagement leads to change, it results in a transformation of the structure, the agent, or both, and the cycle begins anew from this reconfigured point.

Archer's concept of analytical dualism underpins this theoretical architecture by allowing for the analytical separation of structure, culture, and agency while maintaining an understanding of their interaction over time. Her notion of agency is also layered and dynamic. She conceptualises human agency as comprising three emergent forms: (i) the primary agent, (ii) the social agent, and (iii) the social actor. Primary agents are individuals shaped by the social conditions into which they are born, such as family, class, or cultural background, over which they have little control. While interacting within their environments and acquiring capacities, they transition into intentionally behaving as social agents. Through engagement, they may become social actors who reflect on their positioning and take purposive action. When groups of social actors begin to organise themselves in pursuit of shared goals and seek to influence institutional structures, they become corporate actors, in other words, collective actors capable of producing structural change.

A key mechanism in this process of becoming is reflexivity. Archer defines reflexivity as the internal conversation through which agents engage in self-assessment and plan their actions about social contexts. She identifies three primary modes of reflexivity: (a) communicative, (b) autonomous, and (c) meta-reflexivity. Communicative reflexivity involves thinking that is shaped and validated through dialogue with others. Autonomous reflexivity is characterised by self-directed deliberation focused on achieving personal goals and plans. Meta-reflexivity, the most complex mode, involves critical reflection not only on one's circumstances but also on the very processes of one's thinking and decision-making, often questioning structural norms and ethical commitments.

This article draws on Archer's framework to examine how students who participated in the RESP moved from being passive recipients of structural constraints – primary agents – to becoming active, reflexive corporate actors. By tracing their reflexive engagements and identity shifts, we reveal how their agency was progressively activated and consolidated in response to the structural and cultural affordances of the programme and the pandemic moment.

Methodology

This research is situated within a longitudinal ethnographic case study that followed the educational journeys of six students over three years, spanning the period immediately preceding and extending beyond the national COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa. The research site was a university residence where the first author, Joy, lived and worked as the head of residence and co-developer of the Residential Education and Support Programme (RESP). Her embedded presence in the space allowed for deep observation and sustained engagement with the students over nine months during the lockdown.

The exceptional circumstances brought on by the pandemic, which radically altered the social and educational landscape, required a methodology capable of capturing the complexity and relationality of this moment. A case study approach was adopted to provide a detailed, context-sensitive account of the unique educational setting that emerged (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The case study created a bounded system defined by time, place, and social boundaries, enabling the researchers to focus on the distinct dynamics that unfolded during this period.

In addition to ethnographic fieldwork, data were gathered through two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant and one collective focus group discussion. These engagements were conducted online and spanned two years following the initial lockdown.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using Maxwell's (2013) framework of categorisation bins. The first, the organisational bin, helped us chronologically track students' experiences across three key phases: their lives at university before the pandemic, their engagement during the RESP, and their navigation of academic life post-pandemic. The second phase of analysis, the theoretical bin, applied Archer's morphogenetic theory to organise the data and make a conceptual interpretation of it. Drawing on Archer's phases of conditioning, interaction, and elaboration, we mapped the students' developmental trajectories, which allowed us to focus on how they moved from primary agents to corporate actors. Their unfolding agency was understood and layered and non-linear, responding to the evolving relational conditions of their environment.

To preserve the contextual richness of students' lived experiences, we chose to present the data in the form of narrative analysis. Drawing on Maxwell's (2013) recommendation to use narrative as a "connecting strategy" and Polkinghorne's (1995) emphasis on storytelling in qualitative inquiry, this approach allowed us to integrate the students' reflections, events, and actions into a coherent account of their identity formation and reflexive development. The narrative method enabled us to illustrate their internal conversations and sense-making practices throughout the morphogenetic cycle.

Positionality, researcher reflexivity and ethics

The first author, Joy, occupied a complex and layered positionality in this research. As residence head and co-developer of the RESP, she was immersed in the students' day-to-day behaviour and relational interactions. She was exposed to their unfolding emotions, experiences and shifting social roles. Her role as a woman of colour who shared certain cultural and social resonances with the students further anchored her relational proximity. Her formal institutional role and relatively recent appointment introduced elements of

distance from them. During the research, she came to see herself as a “transient insider” (Roberts, 2018), moving fluidly between insider and outsider perspectives.

This carried both analytical advantages and ethical challenges. Joy’s immersion in the space enabled rich insights while exposing her to potential role conflict and emotional strain. Dual-role research contexts can generate tension between professional responsibilities and ethical imperatives (Adler & Adler, 1987). Joy was acutely aware of the institutional constraints and systemic inequities that the students were navigating, and she often struggled with how to respond to these challenges.

Joy and Aslam, her co-author and doctoral supervisor, were in ongoing conversation throughout the research journey about Joy’s researcher positionality. Aslam provided conceptual oversight, methodological guidance, and a necessary critical distance from the immediacy of the field. This supervisory relationship functioned as an intellectual check, ensuring that the analysis remained rigorous, honest, and grounded.

Joy also consulted regularly with a research partner and periodically stepped back from the data to create reflective distance. These pauses were crucial in preventing over-identification with participants and managing the emotional burden that emerged from engaging so intimately with their stories. Following Davies (2012), Joy practised ‘turning back on herself,’ using moments of self-reflection to evaluate her emotional responses, ethical commitments, and interpretive assumptions. This iterative reflexivity helped her remain accountable to both the students and the scholarly integrity of the research.

The study received full ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee at Stellenbosch University. The participants gave us informed consent and we implemented measures to ensure confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process.

Agentic morphogenesis at work

Identities are not static; they evolve over time as they engage with social structures and cultures, which, at times, reinforce (morphostasis) them and other times reshape (morphogenesis) them (Archer, 2007b). The pandemic, a moment of rupture that disrupted the normative flow of university life and created both constraints and possibilities for agentic response, and RESP served as major conditioning structures. This section discusses how the RESP and its pedagogical approach contributed to changes in the participants’ agentic evolution and their post-COVID educational becoming. To fully appreciate the transformations engendered in the students during and after the pandemic programme, we start with a brief synopsis of their personal identities and their lived encounters with the structure and culture at the university, before the pandemic. We then move to a discussion of their pandemic experiences through the RESP and conclude with the participants’ accounts of reshaping their educational lives three years after the pandemic.

The analysis is presented in a format that ties each theme directly to the phases of morphogenesis and the movement across Archer’s identity strata, from primary agent to social agent to corporate actor. We include participants’ reflexive encounters at each stage.

Students' pre-pandemic being

Barnett (2007, p. 27) describes the being of the student as the way in which the student exists in the world, or more specifically, their pedagogical being – that is, the manner in which they stand in relation to their educational setting. At Stellenbosch University, first-generation students of colour occupy a distinct and complex positionality within an institution historically shaped by its Afrikaner apartheid legacy. While the university is actively engaged in processes of transformation, seeking to dismantle exclusionary structures and reconstitute itself as a more inclusive and representative higher education institution, it remains a site marked by its past. Consequently, the educational being of the student emerges at the intersection of a university in flux and their navigation of legitimacy within it.

A recent study conducted on first-generation students entering Stellenbosch University illuminated the students' *being* as aspirant, culturally and ethnically rich, and multi-linguistic (Petersen, 2023). The study revealed the students possessed a deeply embedded 'will to learn' (Barnett, 2007), a disposition cultivated and nurtured by their families and significant others, particularly, their mothers' encouragement and teachers' dedication (Petersen, 2023; Norodien-Fataar, 2016). The students' pedagogical being is also shaped by the broader economic, political, and geographical landscape they come from, their natal contexts (Archer, 2007b). The students were variously positioned. Most of them are from rural township areas, where they lived in low-cost housing, and only one parent in the household was employed. Two students attended Model C, fee-paying schools, and the rest were enrolled in the public schools in their neighborhoods. The international student was from a financially stable middle-class family and attended a private girls' Catholic school in Zimbabwe.

The students revealed a kaleidoscope of experiences with the SU landscape before the pandemic. Upon entry, all the students agreed that admission to the prestigious Stellenbosch University was a major accomplishment. However, for those who did not secure residence accommodation before making the trip to the picturesque Stellenbosch, it was a massive cause of anxiety and apprehension. Upon arrival at SU, they were provided with a place to sleep in the university's backpackers accommodation and received residence placement within two to three days of arriving at SU. The swift coordination between the residence placements offices and the student support platforms of the Student Representative Council (SRC) and the South African Student Congress (SASCO) was instrumental in addressing these students' needs.

For some participants, the newcomers' orientation programme at the university residence was warm and welcoming, for others it was overwhelming. Students were filled with excitement and cheer with all the fanfare during the welcoming week, and delighted when their peers called them by their names. As a participant said, *"When my mentor called me by my name, I knew I found my place."* Others complained about the heat, the lack of freedom to move around the campus, the rigid and packed programme the student leadership followed, and the lack of agency they had over 'what they wanted and could do' during the Welcoming period.

By the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, all the participants had at least experienced residence life for more than a year. In many residences, students share a room in their

first year, and the experience can be hit or a miss. Priyanka described her wealthy, white Afrikaner roommate as warm and wise. She shared how she was deeply moved by the care and comfort her roommate afforded her when she shared an intimate experience that caused her great distress. For the other participants, sharing a room with someone they did not know was a minor issue, they did their best under the circumstances. However, Thando shared how she sought the residence head's assistance to mediate matters between herself and her roommate.

Participants described the structure and culture of the residence as hierarchical and exclusionary, functioning on old traditions that left them disconnected and disengaged. It would seem, they said, that the preferred social language was Afrikaans. They agreed that although efforts were made to make social events more inclusive, the lack of consultation with, and representation of people of colour in matters pertaining to residence life, was concerning.

In the lecture hall, participants disclosed similar dissonant experiences with the structure and culture. Zanele experienced her lecturers as authoritative, distant, and unapproachable. She understood early on that she could not rely on assistance from them and had to apply herself to figuring things out. For Tumelo, the engineering faculty's operational regulations were unyielding and inconsiderate. She explained how she was placed in an Afrikaans tutorial group and felt powerless to switch to the English class. Tumelo was academically excluded after failing to obtain the 65% prescribed pass the faculty enforces with the first-year extended degree programme. With the assistance of peers and the science faculty coordinator, she was able to resume her studies in earth science.

The participants' pedagogical being upon entry into the university and before the COVID-19 pandemic can be described as brittle and fragile (Barnett, 2007, p. 29). They contended with a myriad of challenges in both the living and learning environment over which they had little or no control. Their primary identity, which is mostly inherited from their family, class, and culture and shaped by their social locations and personal histories, was experienced as deficient. Their linguistic, familial, aspirational, and resistant cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) were incongruent with the culture and class of the traditional SU student.

Applying Archer's lenses, it is evident that the primary agent (student) identity upon entry and during their commencement year had not yet been activated for transformative engagement. Although the participants experienced the structure and culture of the learning and living environments as confining and constricting, as primary agents, they were inclined to accept and adapt to the university system. This illustrates how, during the inception phase of morphogenesis, the 'structural conditioning' phase, primary agency is limited to accepting existing conditions rather than transforming them.

Developing corporate agency

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated widespread anxiety and uncertainty across the globe. As nations mobilised to implement containment measures, the South African government announced a 15-day national lockdown, mandating the closure of all non-essential services, including schools and higher education institutions. In response,

Stellenbosch University (SU) initiated a swift and comprehensive campus closure, instructing students to vacate university residences. For students who faced financial constraints and were unable to return home independently, the university provided monetary assistance and transport allowances to facilitate their departure.

Within three days, the vast majority of students had vacated the residences. However, a group of students resisted the institutional directive and government mandate, choosing to remain in residence despite escalating pressure. Nine of these students remained in the residence with Joy as their residence head. Their motivations for remaining were diverse but predominantly linked to socio-economic hardship. Most students cited unstable internet connectivity or inadequate living conditions in their home environments. One student, Priyanka, was unable to secure a flight to Zimbabwe on such short notice and expressed concern about infrastructural challenges at home, including frequent electricity outages. Her desire to continue her academic work uninterrupted, particularly to graduate by the end of the year, further influenced her decision.

Despite initial resistance, the university's executive management acknowledged the legitimacy of these concerns. Two days before the commencement of the lockdown, SU revised its position and permitted students with compelling circumstances to remain in residence. Institutional support was mobilised to ensure the welfare of these students, including the provision of meals, reliable internet access, and computer facilities. According to the *Daily Maverick*, a total of 749 students were accommodated across the Stellenbosch campus during the national lockdown (Shoba, 2020).

This phase captures the beginning of 'sociocultural interaction' and the movement from primary agents to social agents. As a social agent, the student reflects on and responds to the call to go home in a defiant way. Whereas before students accepted their interactions with the structure, and were unresponsive to the constraints and tensions, this time the students stood up against, and spoke back to the structure in solidarity.

The students' choice to stay in residence during the pandemic points to an emerging sense of collective agency. By drawing on their shared aspirations, social networks, and informal support systems, they started seeing themselves as a group with common concerns, forming supportive relationships and identifying ways to help one another. Their emerging social identity was shaped by this shared response to the challenges of the pandemic, marking the early stages of their development of corporate agency.

Exercising collective reflexivity – The RESP

Archer (2007b) argues that agents are not passive in the face of structural forces. They think, evaluate, and act on their goals in light of their social contexts. According to Archer, this process of reflexivity or rumination is the mediating force between their social contexts and personal projects. Reflexivity is the internal conversation that individuals engage in to deliberate on their circumstances, make decisions, and take action. Collective reflexivity (Archer, 2007b) takes the agent's internal conversation outwards, where in community, they reflect, debate and interrogate issues and concerns.

Having exercised their corporate agency to remain in the residence as a group, the participants agreed to follow the pandemic protocols and opened themselves to accepting

the care that was offered. Their receptivity to the initiative of the residential educator (Joy) to share mealtimes and other opportunities to build and sustain community resulted in them co-creating the Residential Education and Support Programme (RESP). The RESP was a series of intentional and informal conversational encounters that provided students with the opportunity to connect and build personal relationships with each other by sharing their histories, experiences, and aspirations. Although it was initiated in response to the challenges of isolation, anxiety, and despair the pandemic brought forth, it grew organically into a forum for debate, dialogue, and critical reflection on pressing societal issues and the broader human experience.

The RESP blended structured and spontaneous learning that harnessed the students' creative and critical thinking. As an interlocutor, Joy built a platform of trust and equality, encouraging open dialogue. She facilitated discussions with empathy and sensitivity to participants' socio-economic and historical contexts, aiming to empower their engagement and critical thinking (Petersen & Fataar, 2025).

Precious, one of the students, described the conversational encounters and engagements as rooted in *"love, intention, and consideration."* She said being part of these discussions made her think about people's circumstances more deeply, rather than judging them. She found herself reacting more compassionately and reflecting on her own shortcomings instead of just blaming others. Priyanka shared how her thought processes were provoked in subtle ways, and she noticed how her behaviour changed even in the ways she consumed social media. For Zanele, the RESP focused on people's authenticity and humanness, which allowed her to see the humaneness in others. People did not seem so *"unapproachable or distant"* any longer. Zanele was especially inspired by her peers' interaction and lively engagement and expressed how this motivated her to participate and contribute to the dialogical discussions. Thando felt like the RESP was preparing her for *"something bigger"* in that the deliberative engagements were uplifting and effectively disturbed her previous experiences of *"not feeling seen and heard"*. She explained that throughout the interactions, an intentional and thoughtful removal of negative thoughts and expectations was replaced with a greater clarity of her purpose.

In Archer's framing of morphogenesis, the RESP was a continuation of the *"socio-cultural interaction"* phase between the structure and agent on the meso-level. While this phase started with the structure and agent in conflict with each other, the unified actions of the agent against the structure resulted in a change in the form of the structure and the agent, which Archer refers to as the *"double morphogenesis of agency"* (Archer, 1995, p. 247). The structure relents to accommodate the agent, as can be observed by the institutional adoption of a caring approach that addresses the immediate needs of the students responsibly and competently. And the agent is transformed by the enabling platform the RESP presents for collective reflexivity. As such, the RESP provided *"social stability and integration by evading constraints and endorsing the students' natal contexts by actively forging a dense micro-world"* and in the process it *"re-constituted their contextual continuity and projected it forward in time"* (Archer, 2007b, p. 43). The safe and supportive net the RESP offered allowed the students to take ownership of their social

world, and reveals the emergence of coordinated corporate agency (i.e. a group capable of shaping structural outcomes).

Becoming corporate actors – Leadership and change

The collective reflexivity fostered by the RESP created a supportive structure and culture during the pandemic, nurturing the participants' confidence and self-belief, sparking a willingness to engage, connect, and reciprocate care. This was evident in the way all the participants operationalised their corporate agency in the various leadership opportunities they took on.

Precious pursued a range of leadership positions in the residential space after the pandemic. She was elected as a member of the House Committee, leading a community of 262 females, and thereafter became the Cluster Convenor, leading five different communities. Precious' main purpose and intention in these roles were to continue critical engagements and place the focus on women's empowerment. She shared how she organised an educational talk on the politics and aesthetics of hair. Precious explained that for much of her years of growing up and later living in the residence, she felt compelled to conform to others' expectations of how to care for and wear her hair. This was a liberatory initiative, and she experienced the curiosity and fascination of her peers' response as hugely gratifying.

Sophie applied for the leadership portfolio of project manager of the mental wellness committee in the residence. She explained how the pandemic motivated her to make mental health a daily priority by creating an interactive way of promoting healthy mindsets. Her committee's response to the suggestions she made for a rejuvenated approach to normalising mental health issues and the feedback she received from the community indicated that they were making a "*tremendous difference*" in their peers' lives, and this was very rewarding.

After Priyanka obtained her first degree, she forged a leadership path in the senior living spaces of the university. Towards the end of her studies for her honours in science, she was elected as the Chairperson of the senior residence. For the duration of her master's studies, she was involved in the university's flagship capstone project, Listen, Live and Learn (LLL) where she occupied a place in the leadership house. Priyanka was instrumental in assisting the project manager of the programme to re-create the stature and significance of the programme to its former glory after its declining popularity following the 2015-2016 Fees Must Fall uprisings.

Zanele and Thando took up leadership roles as members of their faculty committees. Both described how they set out to model and reciprocate the care practices they experienced during the pandemic, in their respective roles. Tumelo became a wellness mentor in the residence. She described welcoming newcomers and helping them to transition and adjust under her guidance as one of the most fulfilling experiences she's had at university.

The students' participation in the co-curricular practices of the university signalled their transformation from disengaged and disconnected to engaged, connected agents of change. This marked the structural elaboration phase of morphogenesis, during which they were not merely adapting but actively reshaping the educational environment itself. Notably, the students disclosed a spectrum of qualities and dispositions they have acquired and

strengthened, including their sense of self-belief, compassion, thoughtfulness, curiosity about others and their own histories, a willingness to listen deeply and attentively, and a will to engage.

Autonomous and meta-reflexivity – Facilitating, leading, becoming

According to Archer, the apex of agentic evolution is the synthesis of personal identity and social identity (Case, 2015, p. 850). The process is mediated by the agent's internal conversation or reflexivity. All the participants relayed intense moments of introspection during their alone time, either after a conversational encounter or when they felt homesick.

Sophie explained how she experienced the solitude as “*surprisingly productive*”, especially since “*I knew I was safe, supported and felt genuinely cared for.*” She further elaborated on her process of reflexivity:

Coming to university, for me, was not just about learning and getting a degree; it was also a respite from the negative environment I came from. Speaking openly about my family struggles and bonding with the others helped me to settle in.

As I found my rhythm, I sat with myself, and you know, wrote down in a book who I wanted to be, what I wanted to achieve in the next few years, and the person I wanted to be. I wrote down the partner I wanted to have one day. I had this book of all the things I want in all aspects: friendship, love, family, career, house, everything! So I think that also helped me realise what I actually wanted from what I thought I wanted before COVID.

The pandemic taught me how to bond with the people who were around me and learn from them. They were kind of like an example of what I would experience out there. I now value people and relationships. I was taught to work hard and make sacrifices, but I now see that academic life and relationships are interconnected.

After graduating cum laude in both her undergrad and honours degrees, Sophie enrolled at UCT for her masters' degree. Although she received funding at both universities, she decided on UCT “*to challenge herself and be in an uncomfortable space that will force her to learn and grow*”. Sophie demonstrated what Archer refers to as autonomous reflexivity, where the agent strategically plans and executes her upward mobility. She steered her own “contextual discontinuity” (Archer, 2007b) with Stellenbosch University as she constructed a new and coherent life narrative that oriented her choices.

Similarly, Priyanka shared how the COVID encounter set in motion her leadership trajectory a year later and catapulted her personal growth and development. However, this came at a cost. She explained,

I have realised that my parents and I don't share the same values and morals. They have little regard for people who do not share their culture and class. I find it difficult to have an intellectual conversation with them without feeling that I have to play small or be quiet to show my respect. My academic achievements and leadership accomplishments is overshadowed by my association with a decent, respectable partner, who is not a Hindi Indian. And I'm Ok with that.

Priyanka is currently a PhD candidate in the science faculty. She expressed her personal transformation has been a process that gained impetus during the pandemic when she realised, she must “invest in herself” and do the “inner work”. She compared herself to her sister that studied at another university in the Eastern Cape, who (in her opinion) has remained the same, although she has studied and travelled. She says,

At SU I have learned to participate and make substantive contributions to an intellectual conversation in a confident and ethical way. I have worked towards becoming a well-rounded individual, acquiring the SU graduate attributes. I have learned to constantly question things – to always know that you don’t know everything and you can always learn something from someone. I have learned to actually engage. These skills are bigger than my degrees and I know I can take it wherever I go!

Priyanka demonstrated an advanced mode of reflexivity, which Archer terms being meta-reflexive. She has critically interrogated her value systems, questioned the structural norms, and worked towards ethically informed, purposeful change. By doing the “inner work”, Priyanka has rendered herself immune to external constraints and enablements.

This section captures how participants like Sophie and Priyanka evolved from adaptive responses to proactive agents of change, using the pandemic as a crucible for personal and social redefinition. Sophie’s strategic redirection of her life trajectory exemplifies Archer’s autonomous reflexivity, while Priyanka’s critical engagement with her inherited value systems and her pursuit of intellectual integrity exemplify meta-reflexivity. These stories underscore the role of personal agency, ethical reflection, and purposeful life planning in shaping identities that resist external constraints and embrace authentic growth.

Conclusion

This article has illuminated the participants’ agentic evolution and the role of the RESP in activating and nurturing their processes of educational becoming. Most significantly, it illustrated how intentional and relational pedagogical approaches in the residential living and learning communities can catalyse the authentic becoming of students and, in doing so, leverage student success for particularly first-generation students (Barnett, 2007, p. 51).

Drawing on Archer’s morphogenetic theory, it shows how the RESP created a space where students could shift from primary agents constrained by inherited structures and cultural norms to corporate actors capable of reshaping their educational trajectories and institutional spaces. A key part of this shift was the students’ movement towards corporate agency, which is a collective capacity to act intentionally and strategically to challenge and reshape their educational and social environments. The RESP fostered this shift by introducing dialogical engagement and embedding care ethics and humanising pedagogy into its structure, enabling students to develop resilient, socially engaged identities and a sense of ownership over their futures.

The research revealed how students encountered the pandemic’s challenges through collective and personal reflexivity while reimagining their aspirations and values. Their narratives illustrate how shared struggle was transformed into opportunities for purposeful life planning and ethical growth, which allowed them to recognise their ability to influence

their trajectories and also broader institutional contexts. They imbued their social agency with thoughtfulness, compassion, and a readiness for social interaction.

The RESP gave the students crucial support during a crisis and went on to capacitate them to move from passive adaptation to proactive engagement, developing leadership skills, ethical reflexivity, and a commitment to inclusive transformation. The RESP's pedagogical approaches highlight how a care-oriented programme is able to engender critical agency, offering valuable insights for higher education transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Ethics statement

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Potential conflict of interests

The authors have no conflicts of interests to declare.

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