Positive Adjustment to First Grade Despite Divorce: Lessons for School Psychologists

Carla Bezuidenhout

North-West University, South Africa

Linda Theron

University of Pretoria, South Africa

Elzette Fritz

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Corresponding author: Carla Bezuidenhout, 26 Mc Bride Street, Brackenhurst, Alberton. Emails: bcarla@vodamail.co.za; carlaresearch2015@gmail.com

Abstract

Positive adjustment to first grade is an important milestone in children's lives. Yet, it is sometimes further complicated by additional challenges such as parental divorce. Drawing on a social ecological perspective we explored how the systems rooted in social ecologies enable children's resilience when their parents are divorced so as to result in their coping well with adjusting to first grade. We used a single instrumental case study that involved visual methodologies to uncover lessons from the story of a first grader whose parents divorced but who continued to adjust well to first grade. Our findings suggest leverage points for school psychologists (SPs) who wish to champion the resilience of first graders who are adjusting to formal school as well as their parents' divorce. SPs can intervene by supporting the first grader's processes of

agency and meaning making; by working systemically to engage systems of support; and by mobilizing systems with task-sharing.

Life includes various transitions that children, adults, and families have to make. For example, transitioning to first grade for children (Kumpulainen et al. 2016); transitioning to a new teaching position for teachers (Meanwell & Kleiner, 2014); and transitioning to a new family life after divorce for parents and children (Fetsch, 2011). Transitions are often associated with risk, anxiety, and, sometimes even with mixed emotions (Dockett, Griebel, & Perry, 2017).

For children, transitioning to first grade is an ordinary developmental milestone (Yeo, 2013). Transitions often involve change. Dockett and Perry (2015) state that transition to formal schooling, for example, especially involves changes in identity and status as well as agency, not only for children, but for everyone who is involved. Children often experience stress and anxiety associated with these changes (Skouteris, Watson, & Lum, 2012; Symonds, 2015). This relates to first graders being challenged by a new educational environment (e.g. a new classroom and new playground), academic standards and scholastic skills that they need to learn, teacher expectations, and the acceptance (or not) into a new peer group (Margetts, 2005; Yeo, 2013).

Unfortunately, some children are faced with more than just the developmental challenge of adjusting to first grade. Hyppolite (2017) found that the risks that some children face co-occur, and this results in heightened vulnerability. For example, the disintegration of family life resulting from parental divorce poses an additional risk to

some children (Wright & Masten, 2015). Such a transitioning first grader then needs to cope with adjustment challenges in the school environment along with challenges impacting on the home environment because of the parental divorce. Landsford (2009) explains how parental divorce may challenge children's development including their academic achievement, emotional stability (internalizing and/or externalising problems), and social relationships. This could result in compound challenges that hinder children's functioning (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013).

According to Bukatko and Daehler (2011), not all children experience the consequences of divorce as negative. Hetherington and Kelly (2002) reported that although children experience short term negative effects (e.g., shock, anxiety, anger) these effects typically diminish over time. Similarly, Arkowitz and Lilienfeld (2017) argued that many children are able to recover form short and long term effects associated with parental divorce.

Still, for a first grader dealing with adjusting to first grade, even the short term negative effects of parental divorce could challenge their functioning further. Also, within the South African context (the study we report on was conducted in South Africa), divorce is a sensitive topic for many parents and children (i.e., it is considered to be a negative outcome which should ideally be avoided and children who are raised by their mothers only are considered troublesome and/or vulnerable) (Newlin, 2017). Due to this perspective, children whose parents are divorced are sometimes marginalised and/or stigmatised.

When children develop normatively, despite the aforementioned risks, resilience is implied (Yates, Tyrell, & Masten, 2015). Resilience is generally accepted to indicate the capacity to withstand risks which threaten normative development or functioning (Masten, 2014c). Resilience is facilitated through resilience-enabling processes that are brought about when children's social

ecologies actively provide and sustain protective resources that are commonly understood to be meaningful to children (Ungar, 2011).

An important facet of the social ecology is the school ecology of which school-based service-providers such as school psychologists are part. Faulkner and Jimerson (2017) state that "school psychologists … make important contributions to the lives of children, families, teachers, and other professionals who work with them in the school" (p. 6). One such important contribution relates to championing resilience (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013). Championing resilience requires preventative and remedial action (Masten, 2014c). For example, school psychologists know about the risks associated with adjustment to first grade and the potential effect of additional risks, such as parental divorce, on the functioning of first graders. They are aware that positive adjustment to first grade is an important developmental milestone because of its association with subsequent school adjustment and academic progress/achievement (McGann & Clark, 2007). Thus school psychologists have the capacity to support school staff and families to prioritise those processes which are likely to minimise the risks associated with adjustment to first grade, as well as those processes that are likely to maximise positive school experiences. They also have the responsibility to develop and support schools so that they are resilience-enabling systems (Daniels, Collair, Moolla, & Lazarus, 2007). In addition, school psychologists have the skill set to facilitate adaptive processes for first graders facing additional risks such as parental divorce.

School psychologists' championship of resilience cannot, however, be fulfilled in isolation. Theron (2013c) explains how important it is for school psychologists to understand that "resilience is a reciprocal, systemic transaction" (p. 528). The emphasis on resilience being facilitated by an interplay between and among the different systems in the child's social ecology relates to social ecological

understandings of resilience (Masten, 2014c). The Social Ecological Resilience Theory (SERT) highlights how positive adaptation to compound risks (such as adjusting to first grade and to one's parents divorcing) is supported by social ecological stakeholders (e.g. school psychologists) who enable and sustain facilitative resources (like supportive teachers, parents and peers) that nurture positive outcomes (Ungar, 2013b). Although school psychologists are central to processes that enable reciprocal interaction between systems impacting on children's healthy functioning, such as teachers, family and peers, Theron (2016) found that extant resilience literature only occasionally included the contributions of school psychologists in accounts of what supported the resilience of vulnerable children. Following Atkinson, Squires, Bragg, Muscutt, and Wasilewski (2014) and Jimerson, Stewart, Skokut, Cardenas, and Malone (2009), Theron (2016) speculated that there are two reasons for the under-reporting of school psychologists' contributions to resilience. First, psycho-educational assessments and tasks consume school psychologists' time. Second, school psychologists are typically inaccessible or absent in low-resource contexts. In South Africa, for example, there are too few school psychologists to serve the population of children in schools (Moolla, 2011) and this is more pronounced in rural, resource-poor communities (Pillay, 2017).

Instead of focusing on interventions and other contributions by mental health practitioners, accounts of what enables South African children to adjust well to multiple challenges favour caring adults, such as warm parents/caregivers, loving relatives from the extended family, and/or supportive teachers (see Kumpulainen et al., 2016; Theron, 2017; van Breda, 2017). However, none of these accounts is specific to first graders whose parents have divorced. Essentially then, it is important to explore what first graders with divorced parents, and adults (e.g. parents, relatives,

or teachers) in their everyday social ecology consider to be foundational to the positive adjustment of these first graders. In contexts where school psychologists are accessible, they can draw on these insights and leverage-related resilience-enabling processes. In contexts where school psychologists are scarce or mostly inaccessible, a better understanding of what enables the resilience of first graders whose parents have divorced could support lay persons and/or school staff to partner with school psychologists to champion resilience.

Thus, the question that directed the study on which this article is based was: Which everyday (i.e. non-intervention-related) resources should school psychologists be aware of that enable the resilience of children challenged by adjustment to first grade *as well* as the divorce of their parents? To answer this question, we narrate the story of a seven-year-old girl, Sarah (pseudonym used), who appeared to have adjusted well to first grade despite her parents' divorce that occurred shortly after she commenced first grade. Sarah's story illustrates the different resources that enabled her to cope well with the adjustment to formal school as well as with her parents' divorce. Even though this specific school context is one without a school psychologists, I use this case study to highlight the centrality of schools and the possibilities of school psychologists' facilitation of resilience-enabling processes in school contexts.

Method

The methodological orientation for this study is the belief that children are central informants about their own lives (Christensen & James, 2017). Thus, when research with children (rather than on them) is conducted, a more precise understanding of the children's life worlds is formed (Norozi & Moen, 2016).

Design

With the aforementioned in mind, we report on a single, instrumental case study. As in other resilience studies (e.g. Fourie & Theron, 2012; Kumpulainen et al., 2016) and following methodologists such as Gustafsson (2017) we argue that a single instrumental case study can offer rich insights into a given research phenomenon, in this case, the everyday/non-intervention-related resources that enable the resilience of children challenged by transition to first grade *as well* as by the divorce of their parents.

Sampling and Informant

The single case study on which we report formed part of a larger study, the SISU study (see Kumpulainen et al., 2016). A sub-sample of these cases (i.e., five) focused on South African first-graders whose parents had divorced (Author, 2018). As detailed elsewhere (Kumpulainen et al., 2016), purposive sampling informed the selection of cases. Following Theron, Theron, and Malindi (2013) who found that the guidance of Advisory Panels (AP) regarding research participants has become common in international and South African resilience studies, an AP guided participant recruitment of the five South African first-graders whose parents had divorced. The AP consisted of two school psychologists and three first grade teachers. Based on their professional experience, the AP generated indicators of positive adjustment. They concluded that positive first grade adjustment, despite parental divorce, was marked by positive cognitive, behavioural, social, and emotional functioning that included, for example, problem solving skills, co-operative classroom behaviour, being able to cope well with discipline, staying seated when doing school work, demonstrating the ability to form and maintain friendships, and exhibiting positive self-esteem and self-worth. First grade teachers from 8 schools in

Johannesburg were asked to use the indicators to identify children in their class whose parents are divorced but who have nonetheless adjusted well to first grade. They nominated five first-graders, all of whom were white, Afrikaans speaking and who attended middle-to-high income schools.

All five cases illustrated first graders' apparent positive school adjustment despite their parents' divorce. For the purposes of this article, we selected Sarah's case because it offers a rich account of the multiple everyday resources that informed her resilience. Sarah's case is exemplary because it highlights how multiple interacting resources – Sarah herself, her parents and members of her extended family, and her teachers and peers – enabled her resilience. The other four cases included most of these resources (in various combinations) but not all of them. The wider variety of resources which characterised Sarah's case offers rich insights which could better enable school psychologists to support first graders to adjust well to formal school, despite parental divorce.

Procedures

Data collection proceeded after obtaining ethical clearance from the North-West University's ethics committee. Thereafter, with the permission of Sarah's parents and with Sarah's assent, the first author visited Sarah three times at her maternal grandparents' home where she resided with her mother and sister. Each visit lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed (all data that were in Afrikaans were translated and back-translated to verify accuracy). It focused on providing Sarah with the opportunity to explain her understanding of what had supported her and why she was able to adjust well to first grade. To this end the first author engaged Sarah in different qualitative activities including semi-structured interviews as described by Fylan (2005), along with visual participatory research

activities that support participants in creating a visual artefact relating to the research phenomenon and then explaining its meaning. The use of visual participatory activities was purposeful and advantageous to the generation of rich data, given how "child-friendly" (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, & Bottrell, 2015, p. 105) visual methods are. Visual activities included Draw-and-Talk (see Bendelow, Carpenter, Vautier, & Williams, 2002), Photovoice (see Sitter, 2017), and the creation of a digital story (see Fokides, 2016). During the creation of the digital story Sarah verbalized how she adjusted well to first grade while the first author wrote down her account. Later, the first author transformed it into a digital format. The first author probed Sarah by using questions such as:

What new things did you have to get used to in first grade?

What do you think you do well as a first grader?

Who or what helped you to do well in first grade?

What would you recommend to other children starting first grade to help them adjust well to first grade?

What advice would you give to another first grade child whose parents have divorced, to do okay in first grade?

Sarah was the only informant who voluntarily reported on her experience of her parents' divorce during the last interview session together. She volunteered this information in response to the first author's question about whether she wanted her parents to view the digital story. The only prompts that the first author used during Sarah's spontaneous account of this experience was to ask:

How did your parents' divorce affect you at school?

What advice would you give to another first grade child whose parents have divorced, to be okay?

The first author also conducted semi-structured video recorded interviews with Sarah's secondary informants – her biological parents as well as her teacher – that each lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview with her parents occurred at Sarah's maternal grandparents' home while that with her teacher took place at the school. Her parents and teacher were asked questions to elicit rich descriptions of what they believed enabled Sarah to adjust well to first grade given the divorce of her parents. They were questioned about who assisted her to adjust well and about the activities that may have helped her do so. They were asked what advice they would give to recently divorced parents whose first grader was in the process of adjusting to formal school.

Analyses

To gain an understanding of the resilience processes that enabled Sarah to adjust well to first grade following her parents' divorce, the first author engaged in thematic content analyses of all the data according to the model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). For the purposes of this article, the only data that was included was that explaining how Sarah's social ecology supported her positive adjustment to first grade following her parents' divorce.   Phase 1 consisted of the first author's familiarizing of herself with the data. Phase 2 consisted of the creation of a list with initial ideas pertaining to matters in the data relevant to the research focus on what it is that supports children's positive adjustment to first grade despite parental divorce. Thereafter, two of the first author's fellow post-graduate students who were also engaged in their own resilience-focused studies also coded the data thematically. The codes were compared and consensus was reached. Phase 3 required the first author to search for themes among codes that pointed to what facilitated Sarah's positive adjustment to first grade. During Phase 4, consensus discussions between the first and second author (see Saldaña, 2009) confirmed the themes and

established how these themes demonstrate how systems support children to continue to adjust well to first grade. The verification and/or renaming of themes occurred during Phase 5 when the first and second authors discussed the sub-themes and what each theme entailed. The results presented below constituted Phase 6.

Results

The first author first met Sarah (a white, Afrikaans-speaking girl) during the third term (quarter) of her first-grade year. This was three months after her parents' divorce being finalised (and father's moving out). Sarah, who was 7 years and 5 months at the time of the first meeting with her, resided with her mother, sister (who was 3 years old) and maternal grandparents in a rented house in a middle-class neighbourhood. Her father lived in a different middle-class suburb in Johannesburg and typically saw Sarah at least once a week. She attended an Afrikaans-medium government school. The school did not have a resident school psychologist, but it was fairly well-resourced and offered a range of extra-mural activities.

Risks Threatening Sarah's Positive Adjustment to First Grade

Internal challenges. Sarah's account of her reaction to the new experiences related to formal school was indicative of an anxious approach to unfamiliar and new situations. Although she attended her primary school's kindergarten the previous year and reported that it helped her in relation to being familiar with the school surroundings, she still felt anxious. During the interview, she said, "The first day of school…I was scared." When she explained her drawing of things that she could do well in first grade, Sarah first reported academic fears. She especially felt anxious

about reading and said, "I was scared to read." When her friends went to play on the

playground where the older children usually played, Sarah explained that she

hesitated and reported that she "was scared" to go and play there with them.

Furthermore, although there was an after-school facility at school, Sarah told the first

author that she was afraid of the lady in charge because she often screamed at the

children so Sarah preferred to attend another aftercare facility in the community

outside of school.

School related challenges. During the interview, Sarah could identify that getting

used to "new friends and a new teacher" was difficult for her. She said that on the

first day of school, "I cried and the teacher told me… to choose a friend." However,

this was difficult because although there were children she knew from her

kindergarten class, she explained, "There were other kids I didn't know yet." She

also sat next to a classmate whom she described as "teasing me the whole time" but

added, "Then I just ignore[d] her." Scholastically, Sarah was aware that the

academic level of first grade was higher than that of kindergarten. For example,

during the photovoice activity Sarah explained a photograph of herself doing her

schoolwork in class. Her comment was, "We didn't have such difficult work in

kindergarten". At the beginning of first grade she struggled to keep up with the

class's working tempo and sometimes fell behind. She also struggled with

arithmetic: "I got many [sums] wrong," she told the first author when she explained

her drawing depicting mathematical sums on the board, which she eventually

included as things that she is good at in first grade.

Family related challenges. Another risk that challenged Sarah's positive coping

was her parents' divorce. Sarah voluntarily talked about her parents' divorce after

viewing the digital story. She explained that prior to the divorce she "couldn't actually

learn [her] schoolwork [at home] because mommy and daddy fought the whole time…

and shouted at each other really loud." Her reaction after they told her about their decision to divorce was that "it was sad." Initially Sarah didn't want to tell anyone about her parents' divorce and she told the first author that she "cried the whole day long" when her parents told her. She explained how the news of the divorce impacted on her in class and that she sometimes "cried during class time" and "felt sad" for quite a while thereafter.

Resources Enabling Sarah's Positive Adjustment to First Grade

Her teacher and both her biological parents reported that Sarah had been obviously anxious just prior to the finalisation of the divorce and in its aftermath, but that she had ultimately appeared to cope well with first grade despite the pre-divorce uncertainties and post-divorce changes to her family structure and living arrangements. At the end of first grade, her final report card confirmed that Sarah had mastered the requisite learning tasks and adjusted well to formal school. In her conversations with the first author, Sarah also verbalised that first grade and her parents divorcing had been hard, but that she thought she had coped well with these challenges. When the first author asked Sarah to draw a picture that indicated what she was good at in first grade, she drew herself reading a book and an arithmetic worksheet on her desk, as well as herself doing physical education activities at school (see Figure 1). Sarah, her parents, and her teacher ascribed her apparent positive adjustment to first grade to the intra- and interpersonal resources detailed below.
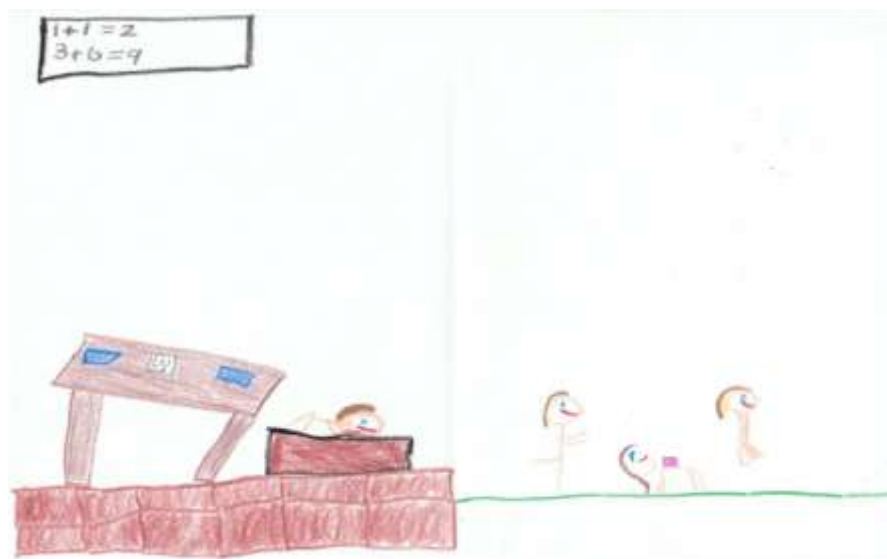
Figure 1. Sarah's picture indicating what she is good at in first grade

Internal strengths as resource. Sarah's mother described Sarah as "a driven child" who aimed to achieve and accomplish outcomes. Sarah was thrilled when she told the first author that she achieved "sevens" on her report card, which, in being the highest symbol of achievement for scholastic skills, indicated excellent performance. Her teacher acknowledged Sarah's internal strengths when she described her as a "very positive child, cheerful… academically strong, [and] a little leader." Another internal resource was Sarah's ability to form positive meaning from her parents' divorce. For instance, after viewing the digital story, she told the first author, "I think it's better that Mommy and Daddy don't live together anymore… because when Mommy and Daddy didn't live together anymore, then my schoolwork improved… My work just got better and better." She also believed that "they [her parents] still love me and they will always love me." Although Sarah missed having her father live with them, she explained how she coped with this challenge by telling herself, "It's just like Daddy is working late in the evenings and comes home to sleep and then goes to work again very early in the morning… I still see daddy often, he just sleeps at another place". Finally, Sarah's faith was an internal strength that emerged during

the Photovoice research activity. As part of this activity, Sarah asked her teacher to take a photograph of her browsing through the children's Bible in her classroom. Her explanation was that "Jesus makes you brave… The Bible helped me to read about Jesus and to not be afraid, because Jesus is with us [even] if we don't finish our homework or school work."

School related resources. In support of her school work, Sarah told the first author that she made friends in class who helped her by distracting the teasing classmate who bothered her when she doing academic work. In the course of the interview, Sarah told the first author that her peers also comforted her when she felt anxious at school, telling her that they would play with her. Another supportive system was her teacher, with whom Sarah had a positive emotionally connected relationship. Her teacher explained that she noticed Sarah's anxiousness when she was commencing first grade as well as her being emotional after her parents' divorce. Her teacher responded to her needs by assuring her often that she would wait for her if she fell behind in work. Sarah recounted that when she told her teacher about her parents' divorce, she said that her teacher "gave me a hug." Sarah experienced her teacher's hug as supportive and caring. Her teacher also introduced Sarah to extra-mural activities, such as public speaking and participating in the eisteddfod at school. Sarah took photographs of these activities as part of the photovoice activity. Her mother reported that the teachers at school were successful in keeping the children busy with school activities. Later in the year, when her teacher sent her to the principal's office with her books to showcase her good work Sarah said that the principal "rewarded me with a chocolate for work well done." Her mother reported that when Sarah "received certificates during assembly for achievements in extra-mural activities" the recognition "made a huge difference" to Sarah's life. Her mother expressed appreciation for the school principal who

acknowledged Sarah's work and greeted her when he saw her on Sundays at church.

Family related resources. Sarah's family was a solid support system during her first-grade year. Her mother communicated to the first author that this support system provided the "safety [that] helped her to do well." Pragmatically, her grandparents often took care of her when her divorced parents were at work. Homework (including practising scholastic skills such as reading and doing sums) appeared to be part of the family's routine. When explaining one of her drawings, Sarah said that when she struggled with scholastic skills during homework time, her mother would encourage her by telling her to "keep on trying." The drawing also led to a conversation which indicated that other relatives also supported her academically. For example if her mother was unavailable to assist her because she was working away from home, Sarah's grandparents, uncle, or older cousins helped with homework. Her father also helped during his regular contact sessions with Sarah. According to Sarah, her three-year-old sister even helped her by "not making a noise while I was doing homework." Sarah's teacher reported that Sarah's mother saw to it that Sarah's "things are always there [at school] and ready."

Sarah reported positive relationships with her family, especially her grandmother. Sarah took a photograph of her grandmother (in response to the photovoice activity) and explained that her grandmother "spoiled and treated" her. Sarah's mother reported that Sarah also had close relationships with both her and her biological father and that her biological father was welcome to see her anytime and that he made an effort to do so. Her parents used electronic messages to keep one another informed about Sarah and to remind one another of matters that concerned Sarah (e.g., school-related events). Her parents verbalised that they made a conscious effort to be "respectful" of each other and mindful of their

interactions and the effect these had on Sarah. For instance, Sarah's mother

mentioned that she and Sarah's father attended school events (such as Parents'

Evening) together. As mentioned above, Sarah's teacher was aware of the divorce

because Sarah had told her. During the first author's interview with the teacher, she

did say that she would prefer parents to inform her about a divorce since it frames

her understanding of the child accordingly. Nonetheless she reflected that Sarah's

parents "handled the situation very well" and she could see that Sarah remained

"their priority."

Discussion

Sarah was competent at adjusting well to first grade despite her parents'

divorce. Masten, Burt, and Coatsworth (2006) define competence as the

demonstration of patterns of capacity relating to effective adaptation that meet

developmental, contextual, and cultural expectations for an individual or specific

group or social structure. From this viewpoint, Sarah's resilience relates to

"manifested competence in the context of significant challenges to adaptation or

development" (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998, p. 206). The case study of Sarah

confirms that her competence was the result of "both the individual and the social

ecology play[ing] active roles" (Jefferis & Theron, 2017, p. 1). Hence we can see that

Sarah's positive adjustment was rooted not only in her individual capacity, but

especially in the "goodness of fit between elements of the mesosystem (interactions

between family, school and community systems)" as Ungar (2012, p. 14) puts it.

Essentially, Sarah's resilience drew on her own strengths and the strengths

within her supportive systems. Supportive systems apparent in Sarah's social

ecologies consisted of family (parents, sibling, and extended family); school (first

grade teacher, peers, extra-mural activities, and acts of recognition); and community (after-care facilities) that acted in Sarah's best interest. This aligns with the contention by Ungar et al. (2007) who explain that resilience is fostered by a child's physical and social environments which include school, family, and community. Importantly, Sarah's case study illustrates that these systems provided everyday supports that are likely to be ordinary. This extends extant resilience studies which have not thus far offered accounts of resilience in contexts where children whose parents have divorced also adjust well to the challenges of first grade. Thus, essentially, our findings are in agreement with those of Masten (2014c) who found that resilience "arises from [the] operation of basic protections" (p. 7) and that the value of these systems as basic "ordinary resources and processes" (p. 3) facilitated resilience. Even though, broadly speaking, this case study does not offer new insights into what enables resilience, it does offer an opportunity to distil resilience-enabling leverage points for school psychologists working in schools with first grade children whose parents are divorced.

Before considering these leverage points, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study which we reported. A first limitation relates to the information found from results of this study that is limited in generalizing to other diverse participants due to Sarah's race (i.e., white) and ethnicity (i.e., Afrikaans-speaking). Our inclusion criteria did not specify that participants represent varied race groups or ethnicities. In hindsight we realise that this was an oversight. It also probably related to the AP and collaborating teachers representing schools which were attended largely by white, Afrikaans-speaking children.   Second, Sarah's case is probably typical of a child who comes from a middle income group and so her context may differ from that of informants from a lower or upper income group. Ungar et al. (2015) explain that resilience is context specific. It is possible that the leverage points

we suggest below would not be as useful to children in lower or upper socioeconomic contexts. Third, this study included only the accounts of first grade teachers who formed part of the school ecology and not of other influential stakeholders within the school ecology, such as management teams. Mulford (2003) states that school leadership are a crucial facet of school contexts. Finally, Sarah's parents' divorce was fairly recent. The onset of divorce-related adjustment difficulties may vary from child to child and can be delayed (Shrifter, 2007). Even though Sarah's positive adjustment was still evident at the end of first grade (8 months after the divorce became final), we cannot predict its longevity.

Lessons for School Psychologists Working in Schools

Activate the child's sense of agency and meaning making. Sarah's personal sense of agency played an important role in enabling her to adjust to first grade. Resilience is typically enabled in a child's agency and mastery motivation that enables the child to adapt to the environment and demonstrate intrinsic motivation (Masten & Wright, 2010). In accordance with the literature, Sarah demonstrated individual agency when she was able to navigate to resources that supported her adaptation (Ungar, 2012). She was particularly adept at making constructive meaning. Meaning making relates to the human ability to construct meaning and "find beauty" (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016, p. 293) in the midst of challenges or adversity. Theron and Theron (2014) found that meaning-making processes were resilience-promoting. According to Masten and Cicchetti (2016), little data are available on young people's meaning-making processes. Thus, while this study affirms the value of a first grader's meaning making regarding parental divorce and adjustment to first grade, follow-up studies are needed to better understand who/what supports young children to make such constructive meaning.

For school psychologists, it is important to consider which therapeutic interventions might meaningfully support an anxious first grader, such as Sarah. Learning from Sarah, school psychologists could support agency and meaning making during individual or group therapy sessions when they are working with first graders whose parents are divorced. It is plausible that supporting agency starts with the development of self-efficacy, because, as Prince-Embury, Saklofske, and Keefer (2017) explain, self-efficacy is the basis of human agency because it relates to people's belief system about themselves and their ability to manage challenging circumstances. Enhancing ego strengths in therapeutic interventions will thus probably benefit the first grader's agency. Therapeutic interventions also involve making the first grader aware of the resources towards which she or he could navigate for support. Following Masten (2014c), meaning making is an important protective factor and therefore school psychologists need to engage with the child in a process of shifting negative perceptions by offering an alternative lens through which the child can search for some form of meaning from the situation because this could bring about resilience to cope well with parental divorce.

Work systemically and engage systems of support. "Support refers to psychological and tangible resource available to individuals through their relationships with family, friends, neighbours…" (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016, p. 216). Ungar, Russell, and Connelly (2014) emphasizes that when individuals navigate towards resources, these resources should be responsive in providing the support necessary to fulfil the need. We see that Sarah's case study is in agreement with international and South African literature regarding how meaningful and effective the support from various systems is in enabling resilience (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014; Theron & Donald, 2012). When school psychologists work systemically, they are more likely to involve the whole gamut of possible

supports which underpin positive adjustment to first grade, regardless of additional

risks such as the divorce of parents. For example, working with the nuclear family

parents will consist of offering guidance towards positive supportive parenting,

despite the divorce, such as attending school events together and maintaining

regular communication about matters concerning the child (Chinn, 2007). Useful, too,

is making the nuclear family members aware of the support structure available in the

extended family (where this is the case) and how the nuclear family and extended

family could collaborate in working together in areas such as assisting with

homework (Grant & Ray, 2016). Working with teachers will entail equipping them

with skills to apply to the classroom such as finding ways for children to talk about

their feelings (Gordon & Browne, 2017). Following Masten (2014c) who refers to

various ways in which schools could support children, school psychologists could

make principals, school management teams and school staff aware of the value that

practices such as recognition for small achievements hold for the first grader. School

psychologists could point to the importance of involving first graders in extra-mural

activities, and explain why the after-care facilities need to be child-centred.

According to D'Amato, Zafiris, McConnell, and Dean (2011) there should be

good collaboration between the school and the family system.   Importantly, school

psychologists should aim to support school and family systems to engage with each

other. This was evident in Sarah's story in our finding that an informative relationship

between her parents and her first grade teacher existed. Fiese (2013) states that "a

child's early success in school will rely in part on how well connected the family is to

the school" (p. 380). Thus, the potential to support children through the provision of

psychological or tangible resources is greater when school and family systems

interact. The school psychologist's role here could have been to encourage

continued engagement from both the teacher and Sarah's parents to discuss how

matters at home were impacting on Sarah at school. Generally, school psychologists (specifically those based in schools) stand central to school-ecological systems. School psychologists are involved with the individual child; they have knowledge of the family and relationships between the child and other role players such as peers and teachers; they have contact with the teachers and school management teams; and they have knowledge of operating systems in the school that impact on the child's functioning (e.g., systems of recognition and extra-mural school activities). School psychologists also know which after-school facilities operate. For this reason, school psychologists need to act as the connection between and among all these systems.

Mobilize systems through task-sharing. When systems engage with each other, they are "co-transacting towards resilience in an effort to augment accessible, protective… resources" (Theron & Donald, 2012, p. 9). However, this process of co-transaction requires multiple role players in multiple systems to actively champion resilience. Seeing that school psychologists are scarce in South African schools, less complex school psychologist tasks could be facilitated by involving important role players (such as school principals, first grade teachers, parents and siblings, extended family members like grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, and peers and other community members) in service provision which does not demand sophisticated psychological knowledge/skills. This is known as "task sharing" (Padmanathan & De Silva, 2013, p. 82). Task sharing involves a "knowledge transfer" (Riss, Cress, Kimmerle, & Martin, 2007, p. 287) which supports layman in supporting children and/or others in their community to cope with commonly occurring stressors (and to refer such persons if they require more sophisticated support). Thus, task sharing should not be confused with task shifting (Lund et al., 2014). When school psychologists include the role players (such as those identified

in Sarah's story, for example) to share the task of supporting positive adjustment to first grade (in the presence of additional stressors such as parental divorce), school psychologists contribute to mobilizing resilience-enabling systems and potentially support positive adjustment to school.   For example, school psychologists mostly work in close collaboration with teachers and families (Theron & Donald, 2012). Task sharing with teachers and families will require school psychologists to share knowledge regarding effective ways of managing the effects of divorce so that it is least disruptive of the first grader's adjustment to formal school. School psychologists can share knowledge (such as the lessons learned from Sarah's story) about how family members can provide academic support during homework activities, how peers can comfort a sad friend and reach out by offering to play together, and how teachers can be aware of a child's academic needs and can reassure the child and be responsive to these needs by waiting for the child if she or he falls behind in work. School psychologists can share knowledge about the implications of being aware of a child's emotional needs shortly after parental divorce, about how the school can support spiritual beliefs by providing spiritual resources in class, and about how a child's sense of belonging can be confirmed through the extra-mural activities that the school offers.

Conclusion

Masten (2014c) found that families and schools are ideal settings in which to facilitate resilience-enabling processes. Sarah's case study echoes Masten's insights and, in doing so, reminds school psychologists that they are well positioned to champion resilience provided they heed what her case study teaches. Sarah's case illuminates the fact that ordinary resources (such as warm parents/caregivers,

loving relatives from the extended family, and/or supportive teachers) can enable resilience. Thus, in support of the positive adjustment of first graders whose parents have divorced, school psychologists would do well to activate and/or sustain children's agency and meaning making and work systemically to facilitate/engage/sustain the resilience-enabling contributions of warm parents/caregivers, loving relatives, and/or supportive teachers. Additionally, and more particularly in contexts where school psychologists are inaccessible, those school psychologists who are accessible at times, need to mobilize the capacity of the aforementioned adults to engage in task-sharing. In doing so, school psychologists are likely to make a meaningful difference to children whose wellbeing is threatened by compound stressors (such as adjusting to formal schooling and a changed family structure following parental divorce).

Acknowledgements

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