

RAISING RESILIENCE BY TACKLING TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Globally, children living on the street is a tragic reality of city life in developing countries. Due to the death of primary caregivers in the wake of the AIDS pandemic and escalating poverty in South Africa, even more children may be forced onto the streets, resulting in an inexorable increase in social problems such as crime, violence, drug abuse, prostitution, teenage pregnancy, STDs and child exploitation. Many children, however, manage to escape, against all odds, the dire consequences of social upheaval or a dysfunctional home. Many South African youth novels attempt to give a realistic portrayal of these children's problems and the resilience that the protagonists need to acquire and exercise in order to survive, let alone prosper. In this article, the youth novel *A red kite in a pale sky*, by a South African author Dianne Hofmeyr, serves as a matrix for the application of a theory of resilience. The question is asked to what extent resilience steers the actions taken by the protagonist when faced with other characters' failure and total collapse. While depicting coping mechanisms is hardly the purpose of a literary work, the use of narrative texts to address troubling issues is considered a channel of communication and support for learners, and a vehicle to gain some understanding of complex psychosocial issues. Most street children attend school, if only for a short time, and can be guided by teachers who recognise that the health of a society is reflected in the care of its young.

KEY WORDS

A red kite in a pale sky, at-risk children, bibliotherapy, Dianne Hofmeyr, psychosocial development, resilience, youth literature

1 INTRODUCTION

We read to discover that we are not alone.

CS Lewis

(I am not) idealistic enough to believe that literature can offer relief to the vast number of people who lack basic food and medicine. But I would like to make one point: the wretches who roam around aimlessly in gangs and kill people by throwing stones from a highway bridge or setting fire to a child (turn out this way) rather because they are excluded from the universe of literature and from those places where, through education and discussion, they might be reached by a glimmer from the world of values that stems from and sends us back again to books.

Umberto Eco

Reading research is often deemed a combat casualty in the notoriously bitter debates termed the “reading wars” (Fletcher & Francis 2004:93; Pearson 2004). These disputes focus on various unresolved issues, for instance the phonics versus whole language dispute, the nature of reading assessment strategies, or the dichotomy between bibliotherapeutic and critical literacy practices. Despite the academic hostilities, some reading promoters have come to pool resources with other lines of research by combining, meta-theoretically, various domains of knowledge, for instance an eclectic mix of literacy and literature, or of psychology and bibliotherapy. Critics of such a “mixed methods” approach view it as a clumsy welding of three worlds that have drifted apart in the past seven decades or so, in spite of the fact that, albeit in their own planetary orbits, they circle the same sun. The supporters of such eclecticism believe that this approach is an honest attempt to marry book and experience, adult views with childlike pleasures, the conceptual with the contextual. Detractors point to the fact that in South Africa this kind of research has not been done rigorously, if at all, and perhaps for very good reason, especially as such ‘eclecticism’ can easily serve as a smoke screen for shoddy research practice.

With these caveats in mind, this article investigates to what extent the welding of different domains to the multifaceted aspects of the literary experience can be effective, enriching and empowering for the young reader. Although it is not commonly considered to be a profitable line of research, the investigation endorses the belief of many well-intentioned and experienced teachers that such an “eclectic” approach is a good and an honest and educationally sound practice to employ.

2 BACKGROUND

For many decades there has been some tension between the so-called “art” of reading and the “act” of reading, or literary and literacy practices respectively. This dichotomy

is kept alive by literary folk who warn against “contaminating the book with class discussions” on the one hand, and on the other, by educators and literacy specialists who ask, to paraphrase Alice, “what use is a book if it does not lead to further discussion?” The divergence in these opposing practices is not only ironic, but can even prove to be harmful. One does not need empiric research to show that prescribed books, especially “timeless” classics, can be done to death by unconcerned or tired teachers. Set books and class readers can be summarised and worksheeted to such an extent that learners would rather die than reread anything by the specific author – or anything similar – in their lives. Ideally, literacy and literary practices in a classroom should be combined to enhance both; this is neither a novel idea, nor is it practised. In this regard, Arthur Gates stated many decades ago:

There can be but two goals toward which we aim in teaching reading – or, more precisely, a single goal with two aspects: to teach children to read well and to love to read. For unless they learn to read well, children will not love to read, and unless they love to read they will not read well (Gates in Robinson 2002).

Chall (1996) endorses this view in her seminal work and indicates that learning to read becomes a self-defeating exercise if the texts are puerile and mind-numbingly boring. It should be easy, then, to argue for the cohesion of the worlds of literacy and literature for the advancement of both through a happy marriage with a third party – in this case, the psychosocial phenomenon of resilience.

3 PSYCHOSOCIAL PHENOMENON OF RESILIENCE

The term ‘resilience’ derives from natural science and describes the ability of a material to resume its original shape or position after being spent, stretched or compressed. In psychological terms, resilience refers to the speed and extent of recovery after exposure to stress. The first resilience studies were conducted in the clinical field and focused narrowly on children who confronted and overcame adversity. Definitions of resilience, however, have expanded in compliance with the expansion of the body of research on this bio-psychosocial phenomenon in the course of the past 20 years, and the term has now come to focus on recovery, whereas in its erstwhile clinical approach it focused more exclusively on pathology.

There are various explanations for the recent expansion in the field of resilience research. Firstly, there is a much greater sense of urgency regarding youth at risk. The technological complexity of society has increased to such an extent that more children are facing adversity, and the nature, scope and severity of the adversities are also escalating (for instance, the AIDS pandemic, growing poverty, teenage pregnancy and substance abuse). Secondly, there has been a deepening understanding of risk and

protective factors and how they function. As this new body of knowledge is being refined and channelled into appropriate mediation approaches which cannot only clinically aid at-risk youth, it can be applied to all children in order to foster a more resilient mindset:

The belief then is that every child capable of developing a resilience mind-set will be able to deal more effectively with stress and pressure, to cope with everyday challenges, to bounce back from disappointments, adversity, and trauma, to develop clear and realistic goals, to solve problems, to relate comfortably with others, and to treat oneself and others with respect (Goldstein & Brooks 2006:4).

Cowen's model (in Goldstein & Brooks 2006) advances four basic concepts, namely competence, resilience, social system modification and empowerment. The salience of this new "wellness" approach has won universal appeal, and resilience research has subsequently expanded to apply to all individuals, whether or not they have experienced upheaval.

In her work with at-risk children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Enthoven (2007) further expands the definition of resilience and describes it as the ability to not only "bounce back", but to "bounce *beyond*". Enthoven's bio-ecological model describes how a resilient mindset enables early adolescents to identify and use resilience qualities in themselves, in addition to being able to identify and use resilience qualities in a specific context, whenever they are confronted with difficult and challenging circumstances. Furthermore, the interaction between the resilient adolescent and the context generates a constructive outcome in the development of the adolescent, such as continuous learning (growth and renewal of resilience characteristics) and an increasingly flexible approach to challenging circumstances (Enthoven 2007:4; Haggerty, Sherrod, Garmerzy & Rutter 1996; Masten 2001).

Enthoven (2007:218) identifies three qualities of resilience: firstly, resilient adolescents have *insight*, which implies a good understanding of their own abilities in dealing with difficult or challenging circumstances, as well as an ability to identify and utilise internal resilience characteristics. Secondly, the adolescent possesses the *quality of overview* which denotes his/her capacity for making a good assessment of the requirements, risks, expectations and potential of the environment (whether school, community, neighbourhood) when circumstances are experienced as difficult or challenging. Finally, Enthoven (2007:197) explains that the internalisation of resilient qualities enables the adolescent to harbour *positive future expectations* (2007:197).

4 RESILIENCE-PROMOTING FACTORS IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Enthoven's (2007) investigation into factors that foster the resilience of adolescents from a low socio-economic background extrapolates factors that serve to promote

resilience in a school situation. She concludes that both resilient and non-resilient learners need a school environment that provides the “resilience-promoting school factors” of safety and good education, which include clear rules with teachers checking on learners and intervening in volatile situations among learners, in addition to contact between the school and outside organisations such as the police. Resilience-promoting teacher behaviour includes knowing learners by name, as well as teachers being firmly in control of the class and remaining calm in a volatile situation. Respondents indicated that they were encouraged by teachers who had high expectations of their learners, and emphasised good marks and regular class attendance.

However, after trauma has been experienced, a different set of internal resilience factors come into play. Enthoven (2007:40) explains the four options as follows:

- Reintegration with resilience indicates that the individual has experienced personal growth through the process.
- Reintegration to a comfort zone, also called stagnation, refers to the inclination of human nature to remain in the state it is used to, or to return to that state as soon as possible (maintaining the status quo) with no growth.
- Reintegration with loss indicates that some or all resilient characteristics have been negatively affected. These resilient characteristics include motivation, hope, and lust for life or capacity for endurance.
- Dysfunctional reintegration means that reductions in resilient characteristics are accompanied by further problems such as substance abuse.

It is important not to regard resilience as a non-static, developmentally appropriate feature that certain youngsters simply possess and others lack. Rutter (1990) described a continuum with vulnerability on the one end, and resilience on the other, or put differently, “susceptibility to adverse consequences at one end and neutral or positive consequences upon exposure to risks at the other”. Children are, therefore, individually more resilient or less resilient at different periods in their lives, depending on the interaction and accumulation of individual and environmental factors. Too narrow a focus on constructive outcomes in just one area in their lives may result in a disregard for the resilience adolescents might show if they are dealing constructively with adversities in another area of their development.

Resilience studies identify personality factors (e.g. tolerance for negative effect, self-efficacy, self-esteem, foundational sense of self, internal locus of control, sense of humour and hopefulness) and a warm relationship with parents or caregivers as affording protection against risk factors such as urban and chronic poverty, low parental education and job status, social dependence, psychopathology or parental emotional problems (Haggerty et al 1996).

There is no consensus on whether acute and brief crises have less impact than long-standing risk factors which exacerbate children's powerlessness against factors which negatively influence their environment. What is certain, however, is that the weight of risk factors increases greatly when multiple concurrent risk factors are present. Therefore, children growing up in the presence of various risk factors need multiple resilience factors, both in themselves and their environment, in order to develop successfully (Doll & Lyon 1998:362). The good news is that resilience factors also work cumulatively.

5 A BIBLIOTHERAPEUTIC APPROACH

According to bibliotherapists, the reading of fiction can vicariously help to resolve troubling issues or hidden feelings in an effective yet harmless way. Some traditional bibliotherapists adopt a psycho-educational perspective on the reading of fiction, and use psycho-analytical approaches in an attempt to foster mental and emotional health, by using reading materials to fulfil needs, relieve pressure, or help individual learners in their development as human beings. Other less psychoanalytically inclined educators use texts to help their learners identify with the "fantasies and feelings" that are either inherited as part of the human condition or are "the inevitable outcome of the tensions inseparable from all family life, happy or unhappy" (Tucker 1992:161). Such identification with fictional characters is thought to help lessen learners' sense of isolation, bringing about a catharsis after experiencing, vicariously, the conflicts and emotions of the protagonist, ultimately leading to self-knowledge. Ideally, bibliotherapy can help troubled children without clinical diagnosis, but merely by being sensitive and discerning while attempting to detect their emotional, social or psychological needs. By tallying these with those books or authors that will be most suitable or helpful, learner response can lead them to gather insight into their condition and themselves. After all, as Bettelheim (1974:4) asserts,

(t)oday, as in times past, the most important and also the most difficult task in raising a child is helping him to find meaning in life. Many growth experiences are needed to achieve this. The child, as he develops, must learn step by step to understand himself better; with this he becomes more able to understand others, and eventually can relate to them in ways which are mutually satisfying and meaningful.

Bettelheim maintains, from his psychoanalytical point of view, that literature is a means to assist children in their "struggle for meaning", as an encounter that helps the individual to find deeper meaning in life by transcending "the narrow confines of a self-centred existence". At best, then, bibliotherapy is not so much a valuable tool in the hands of psychologists, as an important strategy for teachers who can employ fiction in class not only for didactic purposes and literary discourse, but also for discussion, comparison and introspection. Experiencing problems obliquely and discursively through story characters creates a safe distance between the problem and the reader, and the ancillary processes of emulation and catharsis are thereby facilitated (Le Roux 1993:228).

Empathetic teachers and bibliotherapists believe this approach to be preferable to direct confrontation with problems which can, at an early stage, produce negative reactions of defence and denial.

The very salience of the bibliotherapeutic “soft option” opens the field for criticism. Psychotherapists’ condemnation of bibliotherapy pivots on the fact that teachers are not trained to diagnose and, more specifically, treat psychological disorders, and that great harm can result if they “meddle” in affairs that they cannot resolve in a clinically responsible way. From their corner, literary folk plainly state that an author writes neither a therapeutic tool nor a didactic methodology. Although detractors argue persuasively, bibliotherapists confidently maintain that, after all, few teachers wish to exceed bibliotherapy’s limitations by attempting to replace psychotherapeutic intervention with reader response activities where help is seriously needed. At best, then, bibliotherapy is an educational strategy in which sensitive and knowledgeable teachers validate learners’ difficulties and fears, and help them gain insight into their problems. Above all, it can also enrich learners’ experiences and view of the world.

It is, therefore, wise to distinguish between *clinical* and *developmental* approaches. The former is a psychotherapeutic method employed by skilled practitioners with individuals experiencing serious emotional problems. *Developmental* bibliotherapy is a mediation to address concerns before they become problems, especially through discussions around responses – individually or with peers. As a catalyst in group discussions led by a facilitating teacher, a challenging text invites readers to vicariously address problems, for instance, by comparing their own solutions to the characters’. As a methodology, the teacher can provide follow-up activities such as reflective or creative writing, role-playing, cross-curricular strategies, and a variety of assignments or individual pursuits.

In a fictional work, characters exist within clearly demarcated parameters. The omnipotent author creates them, positions them in place, time and context, and imbues them with a biography, personality traits and then plots their development. The pernicious unforgettability of characters is a phenomenon as old as fiction itself, and readers have identified with them throughout the ages – from Achilles to Adrian Mole, from Hermes and Hamlet to Harry Potter. It should not be any different with Laurence, the protagonist of *A red kite in a pale sky* by Dianne Hofmeyr.

The novel, published in 1990, is set in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, during and after the 1987 floods following in the wake of the tropical storm, aptly named Demoina. The protagonist is a South African child from a low socio-economic background who, with other characters, may show aspects of the resilience factors delineated above. The purpose of this article is to apply Enthoven’s resilience matrix to the youth novel, in an attempt to assess the suitability of a literary text as a channel of communication in a South African secondary school classroom.

A brief synopsis of this award-winning youth novel will attempt to acquaint the readers who are not familiar with the text.

6 *A RED KITE IN A PALE SKY*

Laurence Ross is a 13-year-old boy from an impoverished settlement between Durban and Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The five Ross children live with their mother and a mostly absent sailor-father in a house that is uncomfortably small, forcing the family to sleep “top to tail” in the few available beds. Laurence has a younger brother, Horace, twin sisters, Agnes and Dora, and a five-year-old sister called Baby. The family lives in a poor neighbourhood where there is little hope of improved living conditions. The Ross parents have low job status (linked to a low level of education) and the mother is a poorly paid shop assistant at Ismail Karachi’s Cash Store, where she is treated with suspicion. The children are often hungry. For breakfast, for instance, they have a typical KwaZulu-Natal meal of bunny chow (bun atchar), which is a wedge of bread filled with a chilli mixture so hot that the burn helps the children to think that their stomachs are full.

The course of their lives is brutally altered in the aftermath of the tropical storm, Demoina, which hit the South African Indian Ocean coastline in 1987. One night their flimsy house collapses in a mudslide and Laurence is swept away by the flood. He survives the swirling mass of water by clinging to a tree and drifts in and out of consciousness until he is rescued by an army helicopter and taken to a governmental rescue facility. In a confused state he runs away from the crisis shelter in search of his mother and siblings, and is witness to the havoc the flood has wreaked. He meets a kind engine driver who gives him a lift in the locomotive to his mother’s place of work, only to find the shop destroyed by the flood. He struggles to return to his neighbourhood and finds his house demolished. He learns that his mother and baby sister have been hospitalised after being trapped in the devastation, that his twin sisters are missing, and that his brother is being taken care of by unknown friends. Laurence tracks Horace to their deserted school where he has joined forces with acquaintances and appears to be much changed by the trauma. He has started stealing for a gang led by a boy their mother disapproves of, namely Kalla, who used to give his sisters gifts that he pilfered from his part-time caddying job at the golf course. The gang now live in their old classroom, setting fire to the desks, living off the proceeds of stolen goods and drinking alcohol until they fall asleep. Laurence is almost stabbed by Kalla when he refuses to become a member of the gang. To his dismay, Laurence finds that Horace has embraced his newfound independence and prefers to stay with Kalla, rather than join Laurence in his search for the rest of their family.

Laurence sets off for the Durban hospital and meets a streetwise boy, Jake, who teaches him how to hitch a ride and beg money for food. They spend the night in a deserted warehouse that Jake often uses after first making sure that another gang, led by a character called Razor, is not there. Jake takes Laurence to the hospital and then leaves him to find his way to his mother. Although Ma is glad to see Laurence, she is a much-changed woman, with her leg amputated and Baby in a comatose state. She

disinterestedly accepts Laurence's assurance that Horace is taken care of. Laurence is hurt by the fact that Ma never once asks him about his own experiences.

Laurence leaves the hospital with the conviction that it is up to him to bring the family together again. He glimpses the kite of the title that is a

bright diamond of red catching the last thin light. Skimming and scooping, held tight by its length of string to the person on the ground controlling it, but at the same time somehow free. Swooping with a life of its own like some brilliant bird against the pale sky. It is so unexpected. So startling after the rest of the confusion that a lump comes to my throat. And I long to be like it. Free from the chaos. Swooping and soaring but at the same time knowing that a string holds me safe to Ma and them. Now, it is as if the flood has cut loose my kite and I am fluttering and flapping with nothing to help me get back into the wind's current (p 83).

This glaring anomaly in the paleness of the sky represents the protagonist's thoughts against the bleakness of the aftermath of the Demoina floods and the devastation that exacerbated a destitute community. There are three more references to the kite, firstly highlighting its distinctive brightness in a grey world; secondly, its freedom from the sodden earth, which momentarily gives Laurence a feeling of lightness and autonomy. Lastly, although he enjoys the thought of it jubilantly riding the wind, he recognises that the kite is still very firmly, albeit thinly, attached to some invisible kite runner on the ground, which in his case metaphorically binds him "safe to Ma and them".

Although he yearns for Pa, he knows that his father's fun-loving attitude is a refusal to face up to the challenges that fatherhood brings, and he is aware that the chances of receiving parental help are slim indeed. He plans to return to the community shelter and then to ask his mother's former employer for a job. He hopes to find driftwood to build a new house for when his mother returns, and to find his twin sisters.

A red kite in a pale sky does not end in the traditional fantasy mode with everyone living happily ever after. Some learners have found the open end intolerable; others argue that a novel set against the background of the devastation caused by a natural disaster in an already poor community cannot in all honesty have a "happy ending", that the complexity of the characters' experiences cannot be resolved with the plotting by a *deus ex machina*, that if in real life there are no easy answers, a realistic novel cannot have them either. Laurence knows this in the final moments of the novel:

And sooner or later (Pa) will be coming back, like he always does. And when he comes, I'll be waiting for him. Waiting to tell him that everything matters. That life is not as easy and simple as he makes it seem.

Right now, I am alone with nothing inside but an ache. Everything is so different now that there seems nothing that I can do to make it right. But with Ma the way she is, someone has to make it right. Someone has to try. And it will have to be me. Who else is there?

Tonight I will sleep in the shed at the docks. Maybe Jake will be there. But if he's not, it won't matter, because tomorrow there is nothing else for me to do but go back (p 98).

However, although the ending is bleak, pale like the sky, there is a glimmer of hope, even though not as bright as the scarlet kite that soars freely.

7 DISCUSSION

Resilience studies have shown that individuals within the same context profit in different ways from resilience factors. The model attributes the development of resilient behaviours to the conscious and unconscious choices an individual makes in dealing with certain high-risk and disruptive events. As indicated in the first section, the four ways in which individuals reintegrate within their daily activities after experiencing a set of difficult circumstances or trauma, are dysfunctional reintegration, reintegration with loss, reintegration to a comfort zone and reintegration with resilience. Resilience research shows that people are inclined to remain in the comfort zone they were in *prior to* the difficult circumstances, and will reject opportunities and support for growth in their desire to resist uncertainty and change. Reintegration to a comfort zone can also be viewed as stagnation, because it is characterised by a self-protective attitude and a coping with the difficulties through making do and keeping things as they are. Reintegration with loss is characterised by the collapse or decline of resilient factors such as motivation, hope, lust for life or capacity for endurance. In dysfunctional reintegration there are additional problems, such as alcohol or drug abuse and promiscuity. Although it can be claimed with great certainty that the author of the novel did not attempt to write a case study of resilience behaviour, the four boys in *A red kite in a pale sky* represent each of the four reintegration modes:

Kalla:	dysfunctional
Jake:	to comfort zone
Horace:	with loss
Laurence:	with resilience

The protagonist, Laurence, abundantly displays reintegration with resilience, which constitutes the steady process of dealing with the experience of difficult circumstances and is expressed as successful developmental growth within the individual (Enthoven 2007:40).

As a representative of dysfunctionality, Kalla, an extroverted character and a charmer of Laurence's sisters, is a con-man even before the flood and becomes a gang leader à la *Lord of the flies*. Laurence's mother disapproved of him because she found his laughter insincere and his gifts to the twins suspect – possibly pilfered from the golf club where

he caddied. In the pandemonium of the flood his leadership qualities sharpen his risqué dealings and petty crime into full-fledged criminality. As a power-hungry gangster he breaks into the school with his followers, sets the classroom desks on fire, starts looting, steals the school fees, makes cigarettes a habit for his gang of very young children, abuses alcohol, threatens disobedience with a knife and takes the R10 that Laurence received from the kind engine driver. He runs a kind of youthful crime syndicate. There is no indication that when order is re-established and the school returns to normal he will not continue the downward spiral into crime, taking others, possibly Horace, with him.

On his way to Durban, Laurence meets a homeless boy, Jake, who is not much older than himself. Jake is flamboyantly streetwise and has a manner as attractive as Dickens' Artful Dodger. He teaches Laurence how to successfully hitch a ride by advising him to choose potential rides with care, to run alongside the road to indicate a sense of urgency, and to show the passers-by that he is already "bringing his side of the bargain", to make eye-contact with the driver, to invent a compelling story and to limp, if necessary. He has honed his begging skills to a fine art. Jake uses his knowledge to steer clear of danger, for instance by skirting the flooded areas, and by first making sure that the empty warehouse he frequents when in Durban has not first been taken by a gang led by an ominous leader called Razor. Jake, who has clearly been on the streets for a long time, declares that he relishes his freedom: "It was almost as if he was always enjoying some joke" (p 79). After the disaster Jake will probably continue living on the streets in a comfort zone of his own making.

Horace used to be teased by his older brother and appeared to be timid and easily dominated. With hindsight after the flood, Laurence realises that his brother has probably always been stronger than he suspected, because he never complained of Laurence's bullying to their mother, who was too preoccupied to notice in any case. Horace also braved a visit to a cemetery at night when Laurence was too scared to enter. However, Horace is deeply traumatised when the house collapses in the mudslide and he witnesses their mother and baby sister's entrapment, pain and rescue. He finds refuge at the school that becomes a haven only during the flood and joins a gang of shifty acquaintances in their vandalised classroom. He seemingly undergoes a complete change of character when he joins in gang activities such as looting and is successful at stealing a radio. The gang clearly gives him the sense of belonging that he did not find at home with a busy mother, an absent father and an overbearing older brother: "I'm clever enough to know that I don't want to be with you anymore. Kalla needs me, and I don't need you", he tells Laurence when he refuses to leave the gang. Horace's reintegration takes place with losses on many fronts, from the loss of a house, family and school, to succumbing to peer pressure and escalating into crime. The novel ends with an open question as to whether he will leave the gang when school starts again. In his case the ecosystemic deprivation possibly prevents his losses from being reclaimed; after all, there is no

home to return to, no parental concern and no indication that he will share Laurence's resilience and glimmer of hope.

In the beginning of the novel, Laurence fails to understand his brother and he is guilty of the usual, quite innocuous fraternal butting and growling. However, he attains a painful understanding in the course of the catastrophe:

Why was everything upside down and the wrong way around? Why had Horace become like a stranger?

Then suddenly it struck me why I had been so reluctant to leave him. I had always been responsible for him. And this responsibility was like an invisible rope that anchored him to me. Now the rope had been broken. But it wasn't me that had broken it. Nor was it Horace. It was Kalla. He had snapped it as easily as anyone walking through a spider's web strung between two bushes.

Yet it wasn't really Kalla's fault that he had become Horace's hero. Perhaps in a way it was my fault. Although I hadn't really thought much about it, maybe I'd been Horace's hero before. I just hadn't realised it. Horace had always been there to kid about with, to tease a little, to boss around and try out my ideas on. But I had been too dumb to understand that you can't just go on pushing someone about. Horace had been growing up and changing, and all the time I was still treating him like he was some sort of scared fool. I should've seen he was changing. And now since the flood, since he'd been away from me, he'd had enough of being made a fool of. Now he'd found Kalla to look up to (p 74).

Laurence's early lack of insight into his brother's psyche, however, is no indicator of other areas of his development. As protagonist, Laurence is a prime example of self-efficacious resilience. His locus of control is firmly established; however, this foundational sense of self has not only been acquired in the aftermath of the disaster. He has always been "the man in the house", conveniently appointed to the position by his happy-go-lucky father whose motto is: *Nothing matters except that nothing matters*. Due to his mother's long hours at work and as the oldest child, Laurence has always felt responsible for his siblings. As a 13-year-old he sometimes chafes at the bit, begrudging his duties – *It's always me* – but he conscientiously acts as "the man of the house" before, during and after the flood.

There is, according to Enthoven (2007:197), a clear discrepancy between resilient and non-resilient adolescents' ability to access the factors of safety and good education and this can be attributed to the degree in which these children possess the very specific resilience qualities of overview, insight and positive future expectations. When viewing Laurence's character against this matrix, light can be shed on the tenuous link between concept and context, between literature and psychology.

When Laurence is swept away by the mudslide, his survival instincts help him cling to a tree in the swirling floodwaters until he is rescued. He starts looking for his family

as soon as he can and accepts help from a friendly engine driver and a shrewd boy. In the end he knows that the emergency shelter will provide sustenance until he can start building his own house. It is remarkable, however, that he never once in the course of the disaster considers asking for help from the police, the community, or governmental organisations. Possibly his poverty-stricken background gives him no indication that civil aid is an option, let alone a right. Another reason can simply be that as a 13-year-old he has no understanding of governmental responsibility. He, tellingly, in the final moments of the novel, intends to return to the community shelter where he knows he can at least receive aid. He also considers asking his mother's former employer for a job.

In Laurence's re-evaluation of his home situation in the wake of his traumatic experiences, the resilient quality of insight is clearly displayed:

And all the time I had imagined that things would've been better with Pa at home. But they would never have. Ma had always done everything in our house. Pa had done nothing, except bring home presents, take us to the funfair, the hall of mirrors and the South Coast. He hadn't wanted to be bothered with the difficult things. Nothing matters, except that nothing matters. That's just how Pa is. Even if Pa came home tomorrow, it wouldn't help. It was Ma that our family needed (p 97).

It is significant that Laurence does not indulge in self-pity, except once, when he reflects on his role as "the man of the house", and even then, with a mature insight into the Ross family dynamics, or dysfunction, he realises that his father's lackadaisical attitude to life has forced him to relinquish his role as a child. However, in the end Laurence is determined to find his father:

Somewhere out on that sea with its mist and salt smell is a ship with Pa on it. And sooner or later he will be coming back, like he always does. And when he comes, I'll be waiting for him. Waiting to tell him that everything matters. That life is not as easy and simple as he makes it seem (p 98).

As a resilient adolescent, Laurence has the ability to identify and use resilience qualities in himself, and he has always done so in the context of a somewhat dysfunctional home and especially now under the aberrant circumstances of a natural disaster. Whenever he is confronted with difficult and challenging circumstances, Laurence's flexible approach manages to wrest a constructive outcome from a situation that for others is fraught with collapse and failure. He, for instance, returns to the kind train driver who first helped him by allowing him to ride in the locomotive. He intends to return to the shelter because he knows he will receive sustenance, if not much else.

His strongest characteristics during the crisis, however, are, firstly, the resilience quality of 'having insight', which helps to develop his skills in dealing with situations that are fraught with risks; and secondly, the fact that he has positive future expectations,

although he has every reason to succumb to despair. The latter quality refers to the degree in which an adolescent trusts that there will be improvement of a situation after a risk has occurred, and especially of the benefits to be gained by making an effort to deal with the problems. Laurence resiliently makes a connection between his behaviour and his need for safety (sleeping in the train, not antagonising an aggressive Kalla, sleeping in the warehouse, steering clear of flooded bridges). He resiliently attaches meaning to persons and events on the basis of the realisation of his need for safety (teaming up with Jake; returning to the train driver and the shelter). Laurence only deviates from the classic example of resilient behaviour by not considering returning to school to continue his education in safety, possibly because of his self-inflicted role as the restorer of the family. Unfortunately, for adolescents like Laurence from impoverished backgrounds, there are fewer opportunities to access ecosystemic aid. Horace, Kalla and Jake are classic examples of non-resilient children from low socioeconomic backgrounds who succumb to the exposure to negative influences (petty crime, vandalism, danger, alcohol abuse, life on the streets) in the absence of primary caregivers and the collapse of a community infrastructure.

7.1 RESILIENCE IN THE SCHOOL

Schools can and should foster resilience behaviour, but the school in *A red kite in a pale sky* does not fulfil this function. The teachers cannot be blamed for sending the children home when they received the flood warning, although hindsight shows this to be a disastrous decision. What is deeply concerning, however, is the meaninglessness of the day-to-day educational experience for the learners. School only becomes a haven for children *after* the flood, when Kalla's gang vandalises a classroom for shelter. The stolen school fees provide food, cigarettes and alcohol and the desks fuel a cosy fire in the class, around which to sleep.

One thing I knew was that even though there was something funny going on, it was still a good feeling to know that Horace was safe. It was also good to be with friends again. And if you come to think about it, even a good feeling just to be back in the classroom again. And that's something I thought I'd never admit to! (p 57).

School does not feature much in Laurence's thoughts and he has no relationship with teachers, what with one dubbed Old Death Breath, a history teacher boring learners beyond endurance and other strict teachers who are intelligible because they use big words (p 9). Jake has clearly not attended school for some time; Kalla and his gang will in future take no part in a "good education"; Laurence will dispense with school and find a job. The characters therefore do not receive the advantages of having teachers who can intervene to improve the odds of good developmental outcomes.

In the absence of ecosystemic support, the source of Laurence's resilience is his innate characteristics. He cares deeply for his mother and he loved his kind, but strict and morally good, grandmother. In the absence of his father, he easily takes it upon himself

to support everyone in his family. The lack of self-pity or egocentrism in his quests and his future ambitions rest solely on the ideal of bringing what remains of the family together, even in a shack that he intends building.

8 CONCLUSION

Of course, Dianne Hofmeyr did not wish to write a case study on resilience. Neither, for that matter, did JK Rowling, William Golding, Charles Dickens, ES Nesbit, Enid Blyton or Anne Frank. Remarkably, however, most children's and many adult authors deal with resilience, in whatever guise, each in his or her inimitable way, for the simple reason, it can be said, that these truths are self-evident to the artist.

In the turbulence of a South African classroom, especially in troubled communities, there are many class and subject teachers who realise how crucial their role is and how salient their influence can be in the short school careers of at-risk children. Almost all street children attend school, if only for a little while. It is sadly clear here that Laurence will most likely not return to school and that Jake jettisoned school long ago; and it is an open question whether Horace and Kalla's gang will return to school once the flood damage has been curbed. One never ceases to hope, however, that other learners may encounter teachers who combine an understanding of resilience with texts (perhaps in a cautiously bibliotherapeutic way) to address some of the risk factors that are ever-present in South African schools.

The bad news is that a plethora of risk factors will not easily be ameliorated. The good news is that the school environment can more directly address the issues of resilience. Schools can foster the development of overview, insight and positive future expectation in all learners. Sensitive teachers can inculcate in non-resilient adolescents coping mechanisms and patterns of behaviour and help them develop the potential resources to assist their own development. Schools can start by elucidating what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, risk and consequence, by providing the safety that makes good education possible. Teachers can learn to interact perceptively, positively with all learners and build relationships; they can come to understand the protective variables that allow some children to function well in adverse environments and continue to cope well in the future. Through a combination of text, teacher and insight, it will be shown that resilience does not arise from rare or special qualities, but from "the everyday magic of ordinary normative human resources in the minds, brains and bodies of children in their families and relationships and in their communities" (Masten 2001:235).

With such good news, all will not necessarily be well for ever after, but it will be better for many.

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