

Children's positive adjustment to first grade in risk-filled communities: A case study of the role of school ecologies in South Africa and Finland

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative case study on the ways in which children's school ecologies facilitate their adjusting positively to first grade in risk-filled contexts in South Africa and Finland. The insights of two children (one South African, one Finnish) from socio-economically disadvantaged communities, their teachers, parents and significant others constitute the data corpus of this study. The data were collected via semi-structured interviews, 'Day-in-the-Life' video-recorded observations, and Draw-and-talk and photo elicitation methods. The data were analysed deductively using the seven, commonly recurring mechanisms of resilience as documented by Ungar (2015). The results demonstrate how resilience processes are co-constructed and gain their meaning within the given social ecology of a child. They underscore the importance of school ecologies being functional enough, in the face of socio-economic adversity, to continue to facilitate everyday resilience-supporting processes for children. The article ends by considering the lessons of this study for school psychologists.

Keywords

adjustment to first grade, children's resilience, culture and education, participatory research, school ecologies, visual research

Adjusting positively to first grade is a process that is crucial to subsequent engagement in formal education, as well as to children's general healthy development (Chan, 2012). Yet, research shows that a growing number of children in both Finland and South Africa adjust poorly to first grade (Kumpulainen, 2012; Motala, Dieltiens, & Sayed, 2009). Of special concern is the empirical evidence that adjusting poorly to first grade predicts high rates of early school leaving and risk of marginalization (Ladd & Dinella, 2009), as well as socio-emotional and cognitive challenges in later life (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005).

There are many reasons why children may experience first grade as challenging. When children commence formal education, they are compelled to reconfigure their identities and adjust their behaviour in accordance with a scholastic environment that makes demands different from those experienced at home or in day-care (Johnson, DeFeyer, & Winsler, 2009; Sairanen & Kumpulainen, 2014). In addition, risks such as changes in family structure and functioning (e.g. divorce, loss of employment, or parental illness), socio-economic background, loss of community support, difficulties with language of instruction, learning difficulties and/or developmental delays, and experiences of discrimination are identified as threats to children adjusting positively (Noltmeyer & Bush, 2013; Peters, 2010).

Nevertheless, there are children who adjust well to first grade, despite the above challenges. Relatively little is known about why and how this process happens (Corsaro & Molinari, 2005). In particular, literature fails to explain how the

complex interactions between children and their school, family, and communities—i.e. children's school ecologies—facilitate adjusting well to first grade in risk-filled contexts. As long as this process remains unexplained, teachers, school psychologists, other school-based service-providers, parents, and policy makers will be inadequately equipped to understand and support children's adjusting well to first grade.

This article addresses this gap by answering the following question: How do South African and Finnish school ecologies facilitate children's positive adjustment to first grade in risk-filled contexts? The Finnish-South African research collaboration which informs this answer brings fresh insights to understanding children's adjustment to first grade, given the diverse contexts and education legacies of both countries.

Adjusting to first grade: Research insights

Children's adjustment to formal education has been approached in the research literature from several viewpoints, and from various theoretical and methodological orientations. This corpus of research ranges from longitudinal investigations into children's transitioning from preschool to first grade, to those studies that focus more closely on mediating factors that interact with children's adjustment to first grade. In these studies, attention is directed to children's socio-emotional and behavioural adjustment (e.g. Arbeau, Coplan, & Weeks, 2010; Hyland, Ni Mhaille, Lodge, & McGilloway, 2013), children's academic performance and achievement (e.g. Ahtola et al., 2011; Entwisle et al., 2005), and a combination of these (e.g. Hamre & Pianta, 2005).

Existing research demonstrates a strong positive association between preschool transition practices and children's positive adjustment to first grade. A study by Ahtola et al. (2011) in Finland reports that co-operation over curricula and child-related information-sharing between the preschool and the elementary school were the best predictors of children's academic performance in first grade. In addition, collaboration between preschool and primary school teachers and other education professionals significantly influences adjustment to first grade (Margetts & Phatudi, 2013; Rous, Hallam, McCormick, & Cox, 2010). Similarly, positive adult-child and peer relationships are reported to promote children's overall school adjustment and functioning (Dockett & Perry, 2008; Rey, Smith, Yoon, Somers, & Barnett, 2007).

The present study will add to the above knowledge in two distinct ways. First, we take a less examined socio-ecological perspective to understanding children's positive adjustment to first grade in disadvantaged communities. In our study, this socio-ecological perspective extended to applying local, situated and participant-generated definitions of positive school adjustment. Second, our empirical data draw on two distinct cultural settings from Finland and South Africa. These two societies and their systems situated in the global South and North create compelling socio-cultural contexts for researching and understanding the key mechanisms of resilience that mediate children's positive adjustment to first grade.

Methodology

Design

The data informing this article were drawn from a bilateral project entitled: ‘Social ecologies of resilience among at-risk children starting school in South Africa and Finland: A visual participatory study (SISU)’. The methodological orientation of SISU moves away from research *on* children and significant others in their school ecologies to research *with* children and others (Christensen & James, 2008). Following Flyvbjerg (2006), SISU uses a multiple, illustrative case-study approach to explore how Finnish and South African school ecologies facilitate children’s positive adjustment to first grade in risk-filled contexts. Each case exemplifies social ecological facilitation of a process of constructive adjustment to first grade despite the challenges of systemic adversity.

In Finland, the nomination of case-children was informed by consensus discussions between the Finnish research team and two first grade teachers from a local primary school. The final selection was done by the researchers based on their discussions with the teachers and longitudinal, ethnographically-grounded data on children’s educational adjustment from preschool to first grade (Castanheira, Crawford, Dixon, & Green, 2001). In South Africa, as in prior studies of resilience (e.g. Theron, Theron, & Malindi, 2013), a Community Advisory Panel (CAP) comprising local, child-focussed professionals nominated the children whom, in their opinion, were adjusting well to first grade.

Case selection

For the purposes of this article, we used purposeful sampling (see Creswell, 2007, 2012) to select two cases—one from each country from a total of 18 cases. Accordingly each country team engaged in consensus discussions to choose a case that richly illuminated the ways in which children’s social ecologies facilitate their positive adjustment to first grade in risk-filled contexts. This is compatible with prior resilience-focused research where country teams are considered best-positioned to understand how data reflect the systemic factors that enable/constrain resilience (see, for example, Cameron et al., 2013).

A child from a socio-economically disadvantaged community in South Africa, as well as in Finland, and their teachers, parents, and other significant people contributed to the data corpus of each case. In total, the Finnish case draws on the experiences and insights of a girl-child, her parents, and three teachers. One of them was the child’s class teacher, one was a special education needs teacher, and one was another first grade teacher. It was common for this primary school that the two first grade class teachers collaborated on a daily basis, thus both teachers were familiar with the child. The South African case draws on the experiences and insights of a boy-child, his first grade teacher, and members of his extended family (his biological parents, grandmother, siblings, and other kin).

Data generation

As is typical in case studies, following Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, and Bottrell (2015), data generation consisted of numerous levels of data (e.g. child- and adult-generated) and numerous points of data collection. For the purpose of the study, we employed a participatory research approach across all these levels/points in order to capture the participants' *authentic voices* in explicating children's positive school adjustment. The primary informant in each case was the child. Parents, other family members and teachers contributed secondary information.

We invited children, their parents, and their teachers to construct visual and/or narrative accounts of adjusting well to first grade. To do so we used semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2012) and engaged primary and secondary informants in conversation-like ways to understand their opinions and experiences of adjusting well to first grade. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. We also conducted Day-in-the-Life video-recorded observations (Gillen & Cameron, 2010). This entailed researchers recording up to eight hours of a regular school/after-school day of primary informants. Primary and secondary informants confirmed which video-segments (chosen by the research team) explicated instances of adjusting well to first grade. These confirmatory conversations were recorded and transcribed. In addition we utilized Draw-and-talk (Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith, & Campbell, 2011) in which primary informants made drawings that demonstrated their understanding of adjusting well to first grade and then explained what drawings conveyed. Their explanations were recorded and transcribed. Finally, we employed photo elicitation (Cook & Hess, 2007). Participants took photographs (using disposable/digital cameras) of what supported their adjusting well to first grade and then explained their photographs. Their explanations were recorded and transcribed. All these methods were operationalized in ways and at times that were convenient to participants and socio-culturally appropriate. For example, in Finland this meant excluding video-recording the case-study child because researchers and parents were reluctant to do so.

Data analysis

We analysed the empirical data of the cases deductively using the seven, commonly recurring mechanisms of resilience documented by Ungar (2015). These seven mechanisms are based on a comparative 11-country study of youths' resilience processes (Ungar et al., 2007). This study showed that, across diverse contexts, the same processes typically inform positive outcomes for young people challenged by life in risk-filled communities. These mechanisms include constructive relationships, access to material resources, a sense of social and/or spiritual cohesion, experiences of control and efficacy, adherence to cultural norms and beliefs, a powerful identity, and social justice. However, the role and meaning of these mechanisms in children's positive adjustment to primary school has not yet been explored. We hold that the mere use of broad definitions of children's resilience mechanisms has the potential to promote stereotypical notions of

children's positive adjustment to first grade and, consequently, contextually rich studies are needed.

Given the importance of a deep understanding of the specific socio-cultural dynamics in resilience processes in two culturally diverse contexts (Liebenberg & Theron, 2015), the country-specific cases were first analysed by researchers from the same country. In this process, we sought instances from the data that were both confirming and disconfirming of the theoretical frame proposed by Ungar (2015). For us, incorporating an analytic lens that captured the situated nature of children's resilience provided a much needed contextual angle into understanding the ways in which individual children adjust well to first grade and what socio-ecological mechanisms support their resilience.

To overcome the potential problem often associated with deductive inquiry of imposing prefixed categories onto the empirical data, each country-specific team engaged in thorough consensus discussions throughout the data analyses process. Following this, the analyses were exchanged and we negotiated cross-country consensus. This supported finalization of the analysis (Saldana, 2009).

Ethics

Institutional approvals, ethical clearance from relevant school authorities, and voluntary, informed assents/consents from children, parents, and teachers were obtained. Researchers accentuated constraints on anonymity in visual methods as well as participants' ethical rights (Hill, 2005). Researchers were also trained in the use of methods to facilitate ethically responsible employment of these.

Trustworthiness

The credibility of the study was supported by including voices of multiple informants and triangulating them (Shenton, 2004). The inclusion of visual, narrative, and observational data, collected at numerous points in time, afforded rich accounts of the process of adjusting positively to first grade, with particular emphasis on the role of school ecologies. The detailed and contextualized description of each case supports trustworthiness. We are confident that the above attenuate the limitations associated with qualitative work (Creswell, 2007, 2012).

Findings

The South African case: Thabo

Thabo (pseudonym) is a Setswana-speaking, seven-year-old boy. He lives with his father (the primary caregiver), siblings (older brother and younger sister), and paternal grandmother. His mother was present at the outset of the study, but a calling to train as a traditional healer meant she had to absent herself from her family for the undisclosed period of her training. This suggests that at the time that

Thabo was adjusting to formal schooling he was also adjusting to a major change in his home life.

Thabo's family lives in a socio-economically disadvantaged, rural area where 49% of the population depend on government grants (20% live on 80–100\$ per month). Most inhabitants are black Africans (71%) of which 67% speak Setswana; 20% of adult inhabitants have no education; 28% only have primary schooling (The Gaffney Group, 2011). Essentially, Thabo's school ecology is situated in a vulnerable context that threatens children's wellbeing.

Thabo attends a Quintile 1 school (i.e. one that is more heavily subsidized by government so that students can receive one meal daily and pay no school fees—Department of Basic Education, 2013). The school has basic resources, including a small library. Thabo completed his preschool year at this same school and started first grade in 2014 (i.e. the year he turned seven). His teacher has 32 years of teaching experience and provides mother-tongue instruction. Thabo's first grade class comprised 38 learners.

The role of Thabo's school ecology in his adjusting well to first grade. As illustrated in Table 1, constructive relationships, access to basic resources, adherence to cultural norms, a powerful identity, and opportunities to exercise control supported Thabo's adjusting well to first grade (Ungar, 2015). In particular, Thabo's adjusting well was robustly supported by a warm supportive collective that went beyond his nuclear family, or his teacher. Salient to his case, was the schooling-related engagement of multiple family (father, mother, grandmother, siblings) and community members (teachers; local women who cook food provided by the government-funded, school-based feeding scheme; the 'mothers' or caring women at the library). They offered concrete and emotional schooling-directed support regardless of their level of literacy or limited resources. This included taking care of basic needs (such as hunger and hygiene), facilitating homework, and encouraging Thabo.

For example, Thabo acknowledged the contribution of his illiterate grandmother to his adjusting well to first grade. Grandmother confirmed this: 'When I am sitting with Thabo I encourage him saying "Thabo, do you have homework from school? Come let's read". I didn't go to school ... I am able to encourage'. Thabo's father echoed this: 'My mom is not educated; she has never been in school at all ... She only knows to write her name ... so how does she help Thabo? She encourages him!'. His father explained further: 'We encourage him with education ... Even when there is no homework we sit with him. We (all of us and him, his brother) write stories, make up stories ... I make them enjoy ...'.

His teacher (respectfully called 'mistress' by children and parents in traditional African communities) also accentuated encouragement: 'I'm always motivating my kids ... If he's struggling, you must just give him that hug, give him the appreciation that, even if he can't do this, maybe tomorrow he will be OK'. She was empathically aware of the challenges Thabo faced at home: 'I do ask myself—if

I give Thabo homework, is the responsibility for the younger brother or the granny or him, if the father is not there?'

Thabo's drawing of why he was adjusting well to first grade confirmed that support for his schooling was the business of the collective of his relationships (see Figure 1).

Part of what this collective facilitated was supporting Thabo to understand that education was valued in his family and community. In disadvantaged South African communities being invested in education is widely promoted, partly because of its potential to emancipate (Theron & Phasha, 2015). For example, his mother (who was present at the beginning of the study) noted: 'I always tell him, Thabo attend school, you should love school!'. His teacher understood that

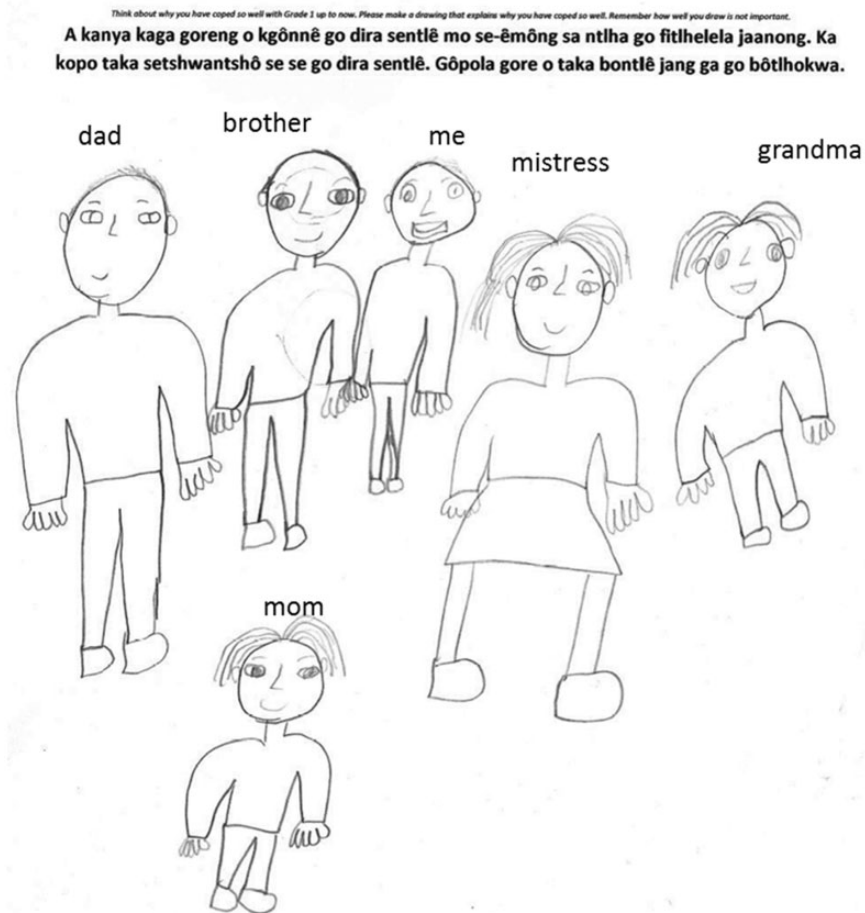


Figure 1. Thabo's explanation of who contributed to his adjusting well to first grade.

this contributed to the significance of her task: ‘Their parents have sent them here so that they can be better people tomorrow’.

His parents supported adherence to investment in education by coaching Thabo how to behave at school. His father noted: ‘I always say to him, you must listen well at school and do the work of mistress [teacher]’. This collective emphasis on the meaningfulness of education supported Thabo’s internalization, and enactment thereof. When Thabo considered why he was adjusting well, he included his own contributions: ‘By writing and listening to mistress . . . I keep quiet in class’.

However, the emphasis on being diligent was balanced with an understanding of the importance of play (albeit with basic toys like a ball), and how opportunity to play strengthened capacity to be invested in education. His father noted: ‘A child needs time to play, also a certain time to meet his friends, yes to refresh his mind’. Thabo echoed this—for him school breaks were times to: ‘Play ball’. In addition, Thabo had some control over play and work times after school. His father confirmed: ‘Before he goes to play the first thing is that work—he will look for me, or look for his mom, to say “I have school work, here it is”’.

Thabo, and those around him, considered him a competent student. This nurtured a powerful identity as a first grader. His teacher called him her ‘clever boy’. She asked him to help peers who had not yet mastered tasks he had (such as reading). Significantly, this sense of identity, and investment in schooling, were not obstructed by the material insufficiencies that characterized his daily life. In his father’s words: ‘Even when he doesn’t have shoes or . . . something that is nice that other children get . . . he will continue doing good . . . in everything he does it’s like he puts in 100%’.

The Finnish case: Maria

Maria (pseudonym) is a seven-year-old, white, native Finnish girl who lives with her parents and a younger sister. The mother tongue of Maria’s family is Finnish. Maria’s home and school are situated in a suburb of Helsinki with a large concentration of non-Finnish-speaking people. More than 27% speak mother tongues other than Finnish, of which Russian, Estonian, and Somali are most common (City of Helsinki, 2014). Characteristic of the area is its inhabitants’ low educational level and income, high unemployment, and prevalence of city-owned rental apartments (Tikkanen & Selander, 2014).

Maria started her first grade in the local primary school in 2014 when she turned seven. She transitioned there from a nearby, city-run kindergarten responsible for the provision of preschool education. She receives one meal daily and pays no school fees, the subjective right of all children attending primary school in Finland. Maria’s primary school benefits from the Finnish positive discrimination policy. This means that the city allocates extra funding to schools where poorer functioning is predicted. Such prediction is based on high percentages of immigrant children, and low parental levels of education and income (Lankinen, 2001). Despite extra resourcing, national reports have shown that learning outcomes

are lower in those schools in Finland that are situated in culturally diverse and socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Moreover, the disadvantages in the community are reported to affect the functioning of the whole school, not only the services directed to children with special needs (Kauppinen & Bernelius, 2013). In sum, Maria's school ecology is situated in a vulnerable context, creating a risk for children's equal opportunities to high quality education, the leading principle of the Finnish education system (Finnish National Board of Education [FNBE], 2014).

Maria's first grade class consisted of 23 students, a class teacher, and a teacher's assistant. Maria's teacher is a trained, experienced class teacher with several years of experience in teaching young children. She is also a qualified kindergarten teacher. Instruction is given in Maria's mother tongue, Finnish. Maria was also able to receive support from the school's special educational needs teacher who regularly visited the class to follow the learning and development of each student, and to provide the earliest possible support in order to prevent the emergence of any problems (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014).

The role of Maria's school ecology in her adjusting well to first grade. The four main mechanisms of resilience that emerged in Maria's account were constructive relationships, powerful identity, adherence to cultural norms and beliefs, and experiences of control and efficacy (Ungar, 2015). In addition, Maria's class teacher included access to material resources. Also, the availability of other professional experts—such as a special educational needs teacher and teacher's assistant—were regarded as valuable resources supporting Maria's positive school adjustment.

Comfortable and emotionally supportive relationships were invaluable to Maria adjusting well to first grade. In Maria's school ecology these included the teachers, family members, and peers. Maria drew a picture of herself and her friends (see Figure 2) to illustrate the importance of peer friendships in adjusting well to first grade. She said: 'I didn't have many friends in day-care. At school I have three new friends. We play together with Angry Birds [a digital game]'. Maria's teacher emphasized that it is the teacher's job to make sure that the classroom is a safe environment with well-functioning peer-relationships.

Maria described her class teacher as a strict but humorous person with a caring attitude by saying: 'She [teacher] is strict and kind of child-like. She doesn't take everything so seriously'. Maria's class teacher accentuated the relationship between the child and the teacher as important to a child's adjusting well to first grade. In her opinion, getting to know one another enables the teacher to support the child's adjustment in the best possible way. Also, when the child is familiar with his/her teacher, the child knows what is expected from him/her in school: 'So we have that kind of mutual understanding of what it is that we are doing here together [in school] and from there comes that trust between me and the child'. She added that a shared understanding of the child's perspective, and effective models of cooperation between the teacher and the parents, greatly facilitate the child's adjustment: 'It is important for the adult to try to understand the child's



Figure 2. Maria with her friends.

point of view [and] what would be the best for the child and the family in order to make sure the school start would be positive’.

For Maria, cultural adherence meant conforming to the cultural norms and valued practices of the school. By way of illustration, Maria commented: ‘One should listen to the teacher and follow the school rules’. When the cultural practices of schooling align with those of the child’s home and larger community, the child identifies more easily with and upholds the values of the school. Considering that education is highly valued in Finnish society in general, it is not surprising that in her account Maria specifically brought up the importance of conforming to the cultural norms and practices of the school. Maria’s parents supported Maria’s adherence by checking her homework on a daily basis. Her class teacher confirmed the value of Maria’s collective network supporting adherence:

Any challenge the child faces, whether it is developmental or social, is more easily overcome when there is a shared vision regarding the role of the school in the child’s life and that families are willing to take their child’s education seriously.

Maria’s experiences of control and self-efficacy entailed her being in control of her schoolwork at home. She described the division of labour between her and her parents with regards to her schooling as follows: ‘I do my homework independently and then my mum and dad check it. If I make mistakes, my dad tells me’. Maria’s class teacher believed the teacher can also create opportunities for the child to experience feelings of control and efficacy. In order for this to be possible,

the teacher has to know the children and take things that are said and done by children seriously:

One [teacher] cannot think that I'll just follow the curriculum with this class when there are clearly more important things going on among children. One can say that our heads as adults are this high and things are happening at the child's level which we have no idea of unless we listen to the children.

In Maria's account of her sense of a powerful identity, being independent did not mean handling things by herself. Instead, it meant knowing when to ask for help if she needed it. Furthermore the recognition from the teacher seemed to be important for Maria's positive self-image as a student. Maria reckoned that what makes her teacher glad is that she can sometimes do things independently, and she took pride in her teacher's encouraging appraisal.

How Thabo's and Maria's school ecologies support adjusting well to first grade: A summary

Table 1 summarizes the mechanisms that informed the resilience processes that supported Thabo and Maria to adjust well to first grade. In particular, it draws attention to how the expression (or form) of these mechanisms is aligned with the socio-cultural context of each child. It also highlights that only five of the seven documented mechanisms (see Ungar, 2015) were integral to how these two children adjusted to first grade.

Table 1. A summary of the mechanisms supporting the resilience processes of Thabo and Maria.

Mechanism	Thabo, the South African case	Maria, the Finnish case
Constructive relationships	A supportive, extended collective	Supportive individuals
Access to material resources	Basic resources (e.g. food, school books, basic toys) made accessible by social ecology (not just nuclear family)	Basic resources (e.g. food, learning materials, digital games) Availability of educational support and expertise (e.g. special educational needs teacher, teacher's assistant)
A sense of social and/or spiritual cohesion	No robust evidence	No robust evidence

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Mechanism	Thabo, the South African case	Maria, the Finnish case
Adherence to cultural norms and beliefs relating to schooling	Following parental instruction to obey the teacher and work hard at school	Doing homework
	Successful schooling promises a better life for individual and community	Home-school collaboration
		Knowing the child helps teacher to support the child; knowing the teacher helps the child to understand the school
Experiences of control and efficacy	Being in control of after-school routine	Schooling is valuable
		Being in control of own school work
A powerful identity	A competent student	An autonomous student
Social justice	No robust evidence	No robust evidence

Discussion

The findings of this study resonate with the mechanisms of resilience identified by Ungar (2015) indicating, in some respects, their universality. We found evidence of constructive relationships, access to material resources, adherence to cultural norms and beliefs, a powerful identity and opportunities of control and efficacy. Importantly, in Finland and South Africa these mechanisms interacted, within the children’s school ecologies, to facilitate positive adjustment to first grade. We were unable to identify the mechanisms of sense of social and/or spiritual cohesion or social justice in our data. The possible reasons for their absence warrant further research.

However, the findings demonstrate that Thabo’s and Maria’s adjustment to first grade, although similar, was distinctively nuanced by their socio-cultural contexts. This underlines the importance of understanding resilience processes as co-constructed and gaining their meaning within the given social ecology of a child (Theron, 2013). To illustrate: For Thabo, constructive relationships entailed an extended collective consisting of parents, grandparents, siblings, and community members who together supported his adjusting well to first grade. This collective embraced a communal belief that education would enable a better future both for Thabo and his community, and that his education was a shared responsibility. For Maria, constructive relationships entailed several individuals, such as mother, father, class teacher, sister, special educational needs teacher, and peers. Her case brings less evidence of intergenerational interaction and foregrounds peer relations. Home-school collaboration and a value base that is shared by the teacher/school and

family contributed to how both children adjusted. In Maria's school ecology, however, it was the class teacher who wanted to learn more about Maria. This reflects the core values of the Finnish education system that address the child's agency in the educational process (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). In Thabo's case his teacher understood his challenges because she was a member of his community. In this way she already knew him. Overall, Thabo's case echoes the traditional African emphasis on interdependence—the self is appreciated, but the collective, and what is valued by the collective, more so (Bujo, 2009; Theron & Phasha, 2015). In Maria's case the values and practices typical to the global North—embracing independence, agency and autonomy—are more prominent (Bottrell, 2009).

The above is also evident in the children's adherence to cultural norms and beliefs relating to schooling. For both children, it meant enacting parental coaching in obeying school rules and norms such as keeping quiet and listening to the teacher. This suggests they both internalized communal beliefs about education being valuable. Yet, explanations about the power of education to create a better future for Maria were not as strong as in Thabo's case. In Finland, education is the subjective right of every child regardless of socio-economic or cultural background, and hence its importance for children's future is not always specifically articulated. In South Africa, education is also a right, but its value of potentially transforming the lives of disadvantaged children and their families is purposefully articulated (Theron & Phasha, 2015).

Material resources played an integral role in supporting both children's adjustment to first grade. This was possibly heightened by their membership of disadvantaged communities. For Thabo, government-facilitated support enabled access to important, but basic, material resources such as food and school books. For Maria, this was more extensive and included ready access to special education services. In Finland this is common, especially in schools where poor functioning is predicted (Lankinen, 2001). These findings illuminate the ways in which resilience mechanisms are shaped by multiple levels of influence, including broader systems of policy (Ungar, 2015).

Implications for school psychologists

The dynamics of resilience processes, as demonstrated by this study, have implications for school psychologists. Part of these dynamics lies in *specific* mechanisms of resilience being prioritized (i.e. constructive relationships, access to material resources, adherence to cultural norms and beliefs, experiences of control and efficacy, and a powerful identity), but operationalized in context-relevant ways. Accordingly, school psychologists wishing to support children's positive adjustment to first grade ought to pay particular attention to these mechanisms. In fact, it is probable that the absence of these mechanisms may constitute significant risk to children's positive school adjustment in any school ecology, be it affluent or disadvantaged. This hypothesis creates an interesting future research focus, also for school psychology students.

Building on the above dynamics, our study yields three core lessons for school psychologists:

1. School psychologists' efforts to promote children's positive school adjustment need to take place in partnership with children *and* their social ecologies. These efforts should be responsive to the unique strengths, vulnerabilities, and values of specific children *and* their social ecologies. Simply put, to support resilience to the challenges of first grade, coupled with those of living in a disadvantaged/marginalized community, demands that school psychologists prioritize collaboration with child and adult members of the social ecology in which the school is located.
2. The above implies that school psychologists need to be willing to learn continuously from all parties involved, and from children in particular, also regarding how positive adjustment is defined (see Bottrell, 2009). In harnessing available resources to support adjustment, school psychologists should have an open mind regarding what might constitute useful resources to facilitate positive transition to first grade. What might appear improbable (e.g. an illiterate grandmother or free play) must be respected if it is valued by children and their social ecologies.
3. Simultaneously school psychologists need to be familiar with the school ecology that they serve. How might its cultural beliefs and contextual realities enable and/or constrain adjusting to first grade? With such culture- and context-sensitive knowledge, school psychologists will be equipped to support every child's adjusting positively to first grade in relevant ways.

The above lessons reflect both Thabo's and Maria's case, but in ways that leave the specifics undefined. This purposeful broadness serves to remind school psychologists of the need for continued enquiry into how specific school ecologies, representing specific socio-cultural contexts, shape the resilience processes of specific first-graders, and for correspondingly adapted support of these children.

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