

# **Perceptions regarding the role of social support in the academic achievement of adolescents exposed to violence**

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I dedicate this study to my daughter,

**Karlien Jacobs,**

who was born on the 4<sup>th</sup> of December 2013.

May you have a loving heart and change people's lives in a significant way.

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## SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of adolescents, who have been exposed to violence, regarding the role of social support in their academic achievement. A qualitative, collective, within-site case study design was applied to obtain baseline data. The data was gathered through consecutive in-depth individual interviews with two male and six female adolescent learners (between 15 and 17 years of age) in a secondary school in Gauteng. Collages were furthermore used to assist participants with expressing their perceptions on the role that social support played in their academic achievement, despite being exposed to violence in their communities.

The study was mainly informed by Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory, but in order to better understand the adolescent as an individual who functions within the ecological systems theory, Erikson's psycho-social development theory as well as the theory of social support were integrated to understand this complex period of development. Interview data were analysed thematically, whilst shared analysis were utilised to give meaning to the visual data presented in the collages.

The results indicate that encouragement to achieve, the provision of care and support to deal with problems in a proactive manner and enabling relationships with significant others facilitated academic achievement despite exposure to violence. Furthermore, positive self-talk, self-discipline and coping behaviours were identified as self-supportive behaviour that was perceived as enabling adolescents to achieve academically.

The study indicates that adolescents who achieve academically despite exposure to violence, perceive social support as playing a significant role in the facilitation of academic achievement in these contexts of adversity. It is therefore recommended that significant others in the lives of adolescents should be informed about the important role that their

supportive interactions play in the adolescent's ability to maintain academic achievement.

Further research could explore the viability of social support interventions in assisting adolescent learners to achieve their full academic potential, despite exposure to violence.

**KEY TERMS:**

Social support, academic achievement, adolescence, violence exposure, South Africa.

## OPSOMMING

Die doel van hierdie studie was om die persepsies van adolessente wat aan geweld blootgestel is te verken, rakende die rol van sosiale ondersteuning in hul akademiese prestasie. 'n Kwalitatiewe instrumentele, kollektiewe, binne-liggende gevallestudie is aangewend om data vir die grondslag te verkry. Die data is deur middel van opeenvolgende, in diepte individuele onderhoude met twee manlike en ses vroulike adolessente-leerders (tussen 15 en 17 jaar oud) in 'n hoërskool in Gauteng verkry. Collages is verder gebruik om deelnemers te help met die uitdrukking van hul persepsies oor die rol wat sosiale ondersteuning in hul akademiese prestasie gespeel het, ten spyte van blootstelling aan geweld in hul gemeenskappe.

Die studie het hoofsaaklik van Bronfenbrenner se bio-ekologiese stelselteorie gebruik gemaak. Ten einde die adolessent as individu wat binne die ekologiese stelselteorie funksioneer beter te verstaan, is Erikson se psigo-sosiale ontwikkelingsteorie asook die teorie van sosiale ondersteuning gebruik. Onderhoud-data is tematies geanaliseer, terwyl gedeelde analise gebruik is om betekenis aan die visuele data van die collages te gee.

Die resultate dui aan dat aanmoediging om te presteer, die voorsiening van sorg en ondersteuning om probleme proaktief te hanteer en bemagtigende verhoudings met sleutelspelers akademiese prestasie fasiliteer, ten spyte van blootstelling aan geweld. Positiewe self-bemoediging en selfdissipline is ook as self-ondersteunende gedrag geïdentifiseer en as bemagtigende instrumente vir akademiese prestasie beskou.

Die studie dui aan dat adolessente wat akademies presteer ten spyte van blootstelling aan geweld, sosiale ondersteuning as 'n belangrike aspek in die fasilitering van akademiese prestasie in hierdie kontekste van teëspoed beskou. Daarom word aanbeveel dat sleutelspelers in die lewens van adolessente ingelig behoort te word oor die belangrike rol

wat hul ondersteunende interaksie in die adolessent se vermoë om akademies te presteer speel. Verdere navorsing kan die lewensvatbaarheid van sosiale ondersteuning as intervensie verken, ter aanmoediging van adolessente om hul volle akademiese potensiaal te bereik, ten spyte van blootstelling aan geweld.

**KERNWOORDE:**

Sosiale ondersteuning, akademiese prestasie, adolessensie, blootstelling aan geweld, Suid-Afrika.

## **PREFACE**

This dissertation was written in article format, according to the APA 6 (American Psychological Association) guidelines. The article (part 2) was written according to the author guidelines of the Journal of Psychology in Africa.

**GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS: JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY IN AFRICA**

**DECLARATION OF LANGUAGE EDITOR**

Petronel Fourie obtained a BA Languages degree from the University of Pretoria in 2007. She has worked as a freelancer in the publishing industry for six years as an editor, proofreader and writer. Amongst others, her clients include the University of Pretoria, the University of Johannesburg, Via Afrika Publishers and AfriForum.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Petronel Fourie', with a large, stylized loop at the bottom.

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Petronel Fourie

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## **PART 1: Section A**

### **Introduction and Statement of the Problem**

Children and youth across the world bear witness to and are victims of violence perpetuated by people known to them, as well as violence committed by strangers in their environments, as indicated by Garbarino, Bradshaw, and Vorrasi (2002). South African adolescents, when compared with their counterparts in the United States, grow up in predominantly violent environments (Kaminer, Du Plessis, Hardy & Benjamin, 2013). In a study on posttraumatic stress disorder and interpersonal violence in South Africa, conducted by Kaminer, Grimsrud, Myer, Stein, and Williams (2008), South African adults were asked to retrospectively report childhood physical abuse. The results indicated that South Africans experienced higher incidences than similar studies completed in the United States (Kessler, Sonnega, & Bromet, 1995). Furthermore, the rate of youth living in major city centers who had been victims of violent crime is as high as 30% (Burton, 2007). Research also indicates that South Africa does not only have the highest number of rape incidences worldwide (Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002), but that children have been the victims of more than 40% of the reported cases of rape, and over 50% of other sexual offences (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2012). Furthermore, the homicide rates of South African male youth are five times higher than the global average (Seedat, Van Niekerk, Jewkes, Suffla, & Ratele, 2009).

The impact of exposure to violence, either as witnesses or as victims, reverberates in the lives of children across all the levels of development (Campbell & Pretorius, 2004; Steyn, Badenhorst, & Kamper, 2010). Research conducted by Thompson and Massat (2005), with school-aged African American children in Chicago, found that exposure to violence had a different effect, depending on the age of the child. Preschoolers fantasise about escaping with superpowers as confirmed by Eth and Phynoos (1984), whilst school-aged children often

develop psychosomatic complaints. Adolescents react much more severely and experience feelings of rage, shame and betrayal, which is referred to as a “post-traumatic acting-out period” (Thompson & Massat, 2005).

In this study the focus is on adolescents who are in schools and are therefore expected to achieve academically despite their exposure to violence.

### **Rationale for the Study**

The impediment of academic achievement currently experienced in South African schools is a major concern. Research conducted by Schraml, Perski, Grossi and Simonsson-Sarnecki (2011) emphasised that it is essential to continuously seek ways to address the issues that may impede academic performance in adolescent learners, due to the fact that school failure is a strong predictor of substance abuse, juvenile delinquency and other problem behaviours.

In the secondary school situated in a predominantly black African suburb in Gauteng where this baseline study was conducted, aptitude tests that involved in excess of 200 Grade 9 learners as part of career guidance services indicated serious deviations in memory retention. Based on the neuropsychological understanding that trauma as a sensory experience may cause a heightened state of arousal (Steele, 2007) and therefore lead to significantly lower memory retentions in the hippocampal brain area, where processing of information occurs (Bremmer, 1999), the outcomes of the assessments indicated the possibility that these adolescents might experience trauma related to their exposure to violence. In discussions with parents, staff and learners it was confirmed that many learners have been exposed to various forms of violence, either in their own families or in the wider community, that apparently impeded their academic achievement.

The rationale for this study was knowledge base regarding the to contribute to the development of ways to support adolescents who are exposed to violence and are expected to achieve academically despite the consequences of their exposure. This study focused on adolescents who are achieving well academically (70% and above across all subjects over a period of one year prior to the study) despite exposure to violence in their communities.

### **Stating the Problem**

Over a period of 26 years, various researchers agree that the impact of violence on the emotional, behavioural and academic achievement of school-aged children results in anxiety, depression, disruptive and aggressive behaviour, substance use, school disengagement, and academic failure, which in turn impedes children's development from childhood into adolescence and beyond (Cooley-Quille, Boyd, Frantz, & Walsch, 2001; Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998; Hutcheson, 1998; Jenkins & Bell, 1994; Lorion, Brodsky, & Cooley-Quille, 1999; Osofsky, Wewers, Hann, & Fick, 1993; Pynoos, Frederick, Nader, Arroyo, Steinberg, Eth, & Nunez, 1987; Schwab-Stone, Chen, Greenberger, Silver, Lichtman, & Voyce, 1999). Berthold (2000) found a specific correlation between higher rates of exposure to violence and reduced academic achievement.

Support for these adolescents is not readily available in school contexts due to limitations regarding human resources in the education support services. In a study conducted by Kleintjes, Lund and Flisher (2010) on the child and adolescent mental health services in South Africa, it was found that the provision of mental health-related services for children and adolescents in South Africa are sparse at best. According to the government's mental health policy guidelines (Strategic Health Plan, 2005-2009), age-specific services for mental disorders, substance abuse and the consequences of trauma and violence, as well as prevention programmes, should be freely available. However, Kleintjes, Lund and Fisher

(2010) further established that whilst policies are in place, the allocation of resources, to implement support programmes are limited. When combined with a scarcity of reputable adolescent mental health services (Patel, Flisher, & McGorry, 2007) these limitations severely restrain the provision of support to this group of learners. Due to the current economic status of the country, many families cannot afford private services. The consequences are that these adolescents often have to find alternative ways to deal with the trauma associated with the exposure that might jeopardise their well-being.

Social support, in various forms, is strongly indicated in the research conducted since the 1980's as a possible way to moderate the negative effects of trauma due to violence exposure on academic achievement. In a study by Bowen and Bowen (1998), it was found that social support by parents and teachers serves as a protective buffer in facilitating school engagement. Garbia-Reid, Reid and Peterson (2005), who investigated perceived social support, parental supervision and classroom participation amongst Latino youths, concluded that these factors are salient predictors for positive school outcomes. Various studies (Calvete & Connor-Smith, 2006; Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russel, 1994; Steinberg & Darling, 1994; Villanova & Bownas, 1984) reinforced the theory that support from family and friends have a significant influence on academic achievement. The premise in all these studies is that learners who feel that there is someone there to help them will perform well in their academic life.

In addition, high levels of social support may alleviate the negative impact of psychosocial stress on behavioural (Crockenburg, 1987), mental (DeGarmo, Patras, & Eap, 2008; Treharne, Lyons, Booth, & Kitas, 2007) and academic results (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). A study by Dass-Brailsford (2005) specifically explored the influence of resilience on academic achievement among disadvantaged black youth in South Africa. The results indicated that strong familial support influenced a resilient response, and relationships with

teachers, role models and supportive community members could be considered as protective factors.

Based on the findings in the research as discussed, one can argue that if social support in various forms is found to buffer the effect of trauma on academic achievement, it might be possible to apply social support as an alternative way to address the needs of those learners who struggle to achieve academically and do not have access to services that might help them to achieve their outcomes. Yet, despite the indications that social support can buffer these effects, limited research has been conducted in the South African context on the interrelatedness between exposure to violence, academic achievement and social support and therefore clear results are limited (Garbia-Reid et al., 2005).

To address the problem of limited access to support, and the gap in the knowledge regarding the possible role of social support in academic achievement of adolescents exposed to violence, as well as the interplay between social support, academic achievement and exposure to violence, the research question answered in this study is:

*How do adolescents who are exposed to violence, perceive the role of social support in facilitating their academic achievement?*

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of adolescents, who were exposed to violence in their communities, regarding the role of social support in the facilitation of their academic achievement.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

To reach the aim of the study, a collective, within site case study design Yin (2009), was used. The design is collective since a specific issue namely the role of social support in

academic achievement of adolescents in contexts of violence is explored by using multiple cases (Creswell, 2007) within a specific site. The research design was applied to assist the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of how this specific identifiable cases of eight learners who achieve well despite exposure to violence, perceive the role of social support in their academic achievement.

The participants were from an English secondary school in an urban suburb in Gauteng, South Africa, where the population is very diverse. The school, with 450 learners and 24 teachers, is managed as a non-profit organisation and therefore only receives partial government subsidies. The purpose of the school is to address the need for quality education in the area where many children are exposed to violence in the communities, as already indicated.

The school was considered as an appropriate research context based on the extent to which learners in the school were exposed to violence in their communities. As suggested by Nieuwenhuis (2007), purposive sampling was used to select eight learners for inclusion in the research project, as described in Part 2.

Data was collected by conducting four consecutive semi-structured individual interviews (Nieuwenhuis, 2007) with each of the selected participants to explore how they perceived the role of social support, in facilitating their academic achievement amidst exposure to violence in their communities. Collages were used during one of these interviews to assist the participants in exploring their perceptions regarding the role of support on a deeper level (Makunga & Shange, 2009).

Data analysis was done by utilising the six-stage model as described by Braun and Clarke (as cited in Whittaker, 2009) until data saturation or sufficiency were reached.

Themes were identified, tabulated and inferences were made in order to address the research question.

A more extensive description of the research design and methodology will be provided in the research article presented in Part 2. The research article was written according to the author guidelines of the Journal of Psychology in Africa. In the next part of this report the focus is on the conceptual framework that informed the study.

## **PART 1: Section B**

### **Conceptual Framework for the Study**

Over the past 20 years, there has been an increased focus on the interdisciplinary and transactional models of psychological development in adolescents (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995). These developments have been conceptualised by exploring the relationship between the developing child and his/her environment, and have acknowledged that the adolescent does not develop in isolation, but rather in relation to his/her family, home, school, community and society (Bronfenbrenner, 2004; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

The study was mainly informed by the bio-ecological systems theory. However, in order to better understand the adolescent as an individual who functions within the ecological systems theory, it is also important to consider the psycho-social development theory of Erikson. Finally the theory of social support will inform the researcher's understanding of the perceptions of the adolescents who participated in this study. The diagram below provides an overview of the theoretical perspectives applied in this study. Each theory will be discussed separately.

<Insert Diagram 1 approximately here>.

*Diagram 1. Integrated theoretical perspectives*

#### **The Bio-Ecological Systems Theory**

The bio-ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1992) is applied to better understand the role of the environment in the lives of individual members. The theory provides a basis for understanding the multiple levels of influences on the developmental outcomes of the adolescents who participated in this study. The theory has also been considered as appropriate for the development of interventions that address complex issues,

such as exposure to violence and the influence thereof on the academic achievement of adolescents (Anderson & Mohr, 2003; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Schweiger & O'Brien, 2005). Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory focuses on the quality and context of the environment of the individual (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). Bronfenbrenner proposed that the world of the human (and in this study the adolescent) consists of a hierarchy of five systems of interactions. The five systems are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. Each of these systems rests on the setting, background and individual nature of the person's life, thus offering an endless diversification of options (Swick & Williams, 2006).

These systems all influence the functioning of the adolescent, as they are dynamic and interactive and reflects the actual relationships in which the adolescent is required to function on a daily basis (Garbarino, 1992). The interaction between the maturing biology of the adolescent, his/her immediate family, school and community environment as well as societal influences shapes his/her development.

Changes or conflict in any one layer will inevitably ripple throughout other layers (Bronfenbrenner, 2004). When there is conflict or violence in the adolescent's social environment, it effects his/her development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). This theory thus supports the immense impact that increased stress and anxiety (as a result of exposure to violence) have on adolescent development. The familial, school and community environment in which adolescents live shape them into the emerging adults that they will become. The views of significant others in the life of the adolescent will also greatly influence what the adolescent thinks about him/herself (Allen, 2010).

Bronfenbrenner extended his theory and identified four interacting dimensions which need to be considered when understanding human development in these systems or contexts

namely proximal processes, person characteristics, systems/contexts and time (PPCT model) (chronosystem) (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

Bronfenbrenner theorized that proximal processes are interactions which occurs regularly and over extended periods of time and effectiveness of these processes are dependent on the biopsychosocial characteristics of the individual, the environment (immediate/microsystem and distant/macro- and mesosystems) in which the processes occur as well as the role that these proximal processes play in actualising the genetic potential of the developing individual (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Examples of proximal processes include parent-adolescent and adolescent-peer activities (Swart & Pettipher, 2011). From a bio-ecological perspective these proximal processes are guided by the characteristics of the person (adolescent) and contexts (micro-, macro-, mesosystems).

When studying the development of the adolescent as a person three biopsychosocial characteristics need to be considered (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) as these have the ability to influence the direction and strength of proximal processes. Firstly, dispositions are forces that can either sustain (e.g. motivation, persistence, drive to succeed) or limit (e.g. aggression, violence) proximal processes. Secondly ecological resources (emotional, social and material) influence the ability of the adolescent to successfully partake in proximal processes and are divided into liabilities (e.g. lack of good food, absent parents, inappropriate peer relationships etc.) and assets (e.g. skills, past experiences, caring teachers). Finally, demand characteristics (personal stimulus) are immediate reactions that either provoke (happy individual) or discourage (moody/fussy individual) psychological processes of growth. The adolescent clearly plays a role in changing his/her environment, either passively (e.g. the way others react to him/her as a result of demand characteristics such as temperament) partly active (through resource characteristics such as strong supportive

relationships) or very active (force characteristics such as the desire or drive to change) (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield & Brink, 2009).

Bronfenbrenner also expanded on his definition of the micro- and macrosystems, as he recognised that although the individual (in this case the adolescent) possesses a system of belief and individual characteristics such as temperament and personality (which influences change in his/her environment) significant others in the microsystem of the adolescent also holds such individual characteristics, which can either invite or inhibit engagement in proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The macrosystem, constitutes systems of belief which are contextually bound which in turn influence the development of personal characteristics and largely depends on the options that are available in the given culture, society or community (Swart & Pettipher, 2011). It is within this macrosystem that characteristics are embedded in the micro-, meso and exosystems, and seen from this perspective macrosystems include communities or neighbourhoods.

The most profound and immediate influence on adolescent development is within the microsystem, which consists of the adolescent's direct environment or setting, such as family or school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) where proximal processes are played out (Swart & Pettipher, 2011). The microsystem, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), is portrayed by a complex configuration of activities, social roles and interpersonal relationships in the adolescent's immediate setting. Microsystem level context for the adolescent learner include family relationships, which according to the ecological systems theory are transactional, as both the adolescent and family members affect and are affected by one another (Schweiger & O'Brien, 2005). Attachment, or the emotional bond that the adolescent develops with his or her family, is also a critical aspect in the adolescent's micro-system (Hong, Algood, Chiu, & Lee, 2011).

Other microsystems that play a significant role in the development of adolescents are the school, peer groups and the immediate neighbourhood in which the adolescent live. It is important to gain an understanding into these microsystems as the adolescent learner might either experience this as a nurturing centerpiece or it may become a troubling set of memories of violent encounters (Rogoff, 2003). Microsystems can either serve as a protective factor (e.g. provide social support to the adolescent) or become a risk factor (e.g. community violence, unsupportive parents), as indicated by Bronfenbrenner, (1992). If researchers can gain access to these systems, they would be able to have more social knowledge, which will increase the possibilities to understand the role of social support in these systems and provide rich opportunities to initiate caring and nurturing relationships within these microsystems (Swick & Williams, 2006).

The macrosystem is considered a “cultural blueprint”, which comprise cultural beliefs, resources, opportunity structures, life-course options etc. (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The macrosystem, for the adolescents who participated in this study, includes attitudes and ideologies of the South African society such as gender and racial discrimination, a communal culture of violence and corruption as well as religious and cultural practices (Swartz, 2010). Garbarino (1992) describes the macrosystem as an umbrella of beliefs, services and support that is an absolute necessity in the lives of adolescent learners, as without these, adolescents as well as their families are open to great harm and deterioration. Swart & Pettipher (2011) argues that the macrosystem of the individual has an impact on the nature of interactions of all the other levels, thus providing structure and content to the inner systems. Consequently, if researchers can develop an awareness programme to assist stronger family support strategies and policies in their macrosystems, it may positively contribute to the empowerment of adolescent learners who have been exposed to violence in their communities (Swick & Williams, 2006). Changes in the macrosystem of the adolescent

might have a reciprocal influence therefore changing communities, classroom systems, families and ultimately the adolescents themselves (Swart & Pettipher, 2011).

The mesosystem consists of the interrelationship between two or more of the adolescent's microsystems, or in short, a system of microsystems. For these adolescent learners, the mesosystem consist of interrelationships between home, school, peer groups and the community. Swartz (2010) found that, in the South African township context the linkages between home, school and the community as mesosystems are often limited, possibly as a result of adult caregivers who are either permanently absent or busy making a living in poorly paid, long-hour jobs. An understanding into mesosystems can nurture families into developing social support structures to facilitate them to better respond to specific stressors that they face (Heretic, 2003). According to Swart & Pettipher (2011) experiences in one microsystem (e.g. adolescent-teacher relationship) may influence interactions in another microsystem (e.g. adolescent-parent relationship) and may protect the adolescent from the psychological effects of an unsupportive environment. They further note that this model provides a framework for identifying assets within microsystems (e.g. a well-run after school centre).

The exosystem also inhabits the space between the micro- and macrosystems (Liao, Lee, Roberts-Lewis, Hong, & Jiao, 2011), such as institutions and practices which influences other microsystems in which the adolescent has proximal relations. Examples in the context of this study include adults' general behaviour in society, parental workplace conditions, the education system, mass media and the economy. The exosystem has a direct impact on the lives of adolescent learners and can either empower (e.g. quality education system ensures good adolescent-teacher relationships) or degrade (e.g. work stress influences the adolescent-parent relationship, which in turn affects peer relations) them, especially when the exosystem is under stress or neglected. Adolescent learners and families in general need to be

empowered by their exosystems, through the facilitation of effective social support within these systems (Galansky, 1999).

Finally, Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes the chronosystem as “changes over time within the person and within the environment that alter the relationship between the person and the environment” (p. 724). For these adolescent learners, given South Africa’s distinctive history, the chronosystem includes their families’ journeys through the apartheid era, as well as individual and environmental life-changes e.g. adjustments in the family structure. This shifts between schools and in some instances between families and homes. Understanding these chronosystems can assist adolescents and their families in learning from their personal, familial, societal and historical lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), especially within the context of the violence that they are exposed to over a period of time.

An important element of Bronfenbrenner’s model in this study is that adolescents are active participants in their development and their individual perceptions of their contexts play a fundamental role in understanding how they will interact with their environments, as their perceptions of their circumstances (in this study their perceptions of social support) greatly influences the way in which they respond to their human and physical contexts (Swart & Pettipher, 2011).

The last element of the PPCT model is time, and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) divided time into micro-time (during a specific activity/interaction e.g. adolescent-teacher activity) meso-time (the consistency of the interaction) and macro-time (chronosystem). Time and timing are equally important, as effective proximal processes involves progressively more reciprocal interactions with occur regularly over an extended period of time.

### **Psycho-Social Development Theory**

The eight stages of psycho-social development, described by Erikson (1956), provides a basis for understanding adolescents by presenting clear explanations of the developmental tasks involved in the social and emotional development of children that continue into adulthood. The developmental crisis of identity versus confusion in which the adolescent (13 to 19 years of age) finds him/herself, must be resolved to enable the adolescent to move to the next stage as a socially and emotionally healthy individual. If the crises are not successfully solved, developmental difficulties may occur. Increased stress and anxiety levels are often associated with such unresolved challenges, as this period of development is marked not only by hormonal changes associated with adolescence, but also involve a growth spurt and the advancement of reasoning and problem solving (Steinberg & Darling, 2003).

Exposure to violence at any age can create delays in the accomplishment of important developmental tasks. However, several factors have been identified that might mitigate the impact that violence exposure has on adolescent learners (Allen, 2010). Lazarus & Folkman (1984) identified availability of support, specifically parental support as a factor that can successfully buffer the impact that violence exposure has on adolescent learners.

### **Theory of Social Support**

Shumaer and Brownell (1984) define social support as an “exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient” (p. 13). They distinguish between the health-sustaining and the stress-reducing functions of social support, where the health-sustaining function is to enhance the well-being of the recipient in the absence of stress, the compensating or stress reducing function serves a buffering effect in the presence of stress (Depner, Wethlington, & Korshaven, 1982; House, 1981). Social support can function

directly as a coping strategy, but only if it meets the specific needs evoked by the stressor and has the ability to exchange the resources needed, e.g. if the stressor involves difficulty with academic material, an important resource might be the provision of tangible assistance with the material (Brownell, 1982). It is clear that due to the contextual nature of social support, phenomena cannot be fully understood without considering the influence that ecological factors have on them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Schwartz, 1982; Stokols, 1983; Trickett, 1983).

### **Integrating the Theoretical Lenses**

Erikson's theory of psycho-social development, Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory and the theory of social support provide an useful framework for understanding this period of development within the context of the adolescent's environment. The adolescence period, which is typically characterised by change and confusion, is exasperated by the increasing violence in these adolescents' communities, which inevitably influences academic performance. Violence further exposes the adolescent to complex psychological trauma, which in turn can paralyse ego functions, create a state of helplessness, and interfere with identity development (Allen, 2010).

## **PART 1: Section C**

### **Literature Overview**

#### **Towards an Understanding of Adolescent Development, the Impact of Exposure to Violence and the Value of Social Support for Academic Achievement**

In this section of the report an overview of the literature that was studied to provide the researcher with clearer understanding of adolescent development, the impact of exposure to violence and the value of social support, is presented to set the scene for the discussion of the findings that will be presented in Part 3.

#### **Adolescence – A Period of Heightened Vulnerability**

**Defining adolescence as a life stage.** Adolescence, the journey from childhood into adulthood, is described as a period of heightened vulnerability, characterised by biological, physical, cognitive and psychosocial changes (Berger, 2003; Frydenberg, 1997; Fern & Thom, 2001). These changes are associated with difficult and stressful developmental tasks such as rapid physical growth, dealing with the awakening of sexuality, discovering new ways of thinking, gaining economic independence and reaching emotional maturity (Gouws, Kruger, & Burger, 2000; Mwamwenda, 1996). Adolescent wellness, according to Gouws et al. (2000), can be sabotaged by these changes and complexities that they face in all domains of development.

Adolescents are confronted with several obstacles on a daily basis within the school context. Grade 9 was chosen, as important life choices are made during this school year, and it is also a possible exit year. The specific challenges implicated for Grade 9 learners is that, besides the particular developmental challenges associated with adolescence, they also have

to make decisions about their future, whilst adapting to the increased work load and higher levels of cognitive thinking required during secondary school (Dalzelle, 2005).

**Physical development.** The domain of physical development is characterised by an increase in hormones which surges through the body, resulting in turbulent moods, heightened emotions and anger (Berger, 2003). Adolescents are often dissatisfied with the appearance of their own bodies during puberty, and this perception of body image during the growth spurt greatly influences his/her sense of self (Gouws et al., 2000). Berger (2003) also describes adolescence as a period of sexual maturation and the rate of physical maturity will have an effect on the adolescent's psychological and social development (Fern & Thom, 2001).

**Social development.** According to Gouws et al. (2000), the developmental task of socialising involves developing skills in order to form friendships, engage in intimate relations as well as the appropriate interaction with authoritative figures. Adolescents also need to learn to respect and tolerate cultural differences, whilst at the same time accept their own cultural and personal identity. The adolescent strives for independence and autonomy under the guidance and direction of social relations of family, friends and the community (Berger, 2003), ultimately moving forward to social maturity. Pretorius, Van den Berg and Louw (2003) is of the opinion that positive communication patterns, consistent discipline regarding behavioral limits, closeness to parents, parental involvement and strong parental control assists the adolescent towards independence. Belonging to a group is very important during adolescence and according to Rice (1990) the adolescent's self-concept and self-worth largely depends on the support and approval from peers.

It is this desire of the adolescent to be acknowledged and accepted that might lead to an increase in conformity or in other words, tempt the adolescent to become absorbed in group behavior. Mwamwenda (1996) states that conformity to a peer group might have both

a positive (acceptance, security, understanding) as well as a negative (rejection, antisocial behaviour, conflict) impact on adolescents.

**Conative development.** Conative development refers to the maturation of the adolescent's will, which grows out of the motivation of the adolescent to attain a goal after actualising possibilities. This 'will' includes motivation and decision making (Gouws et al., 2000) and the conative life of the adolescent is influenced by family situations (e.g. parental standards, ambitions and parenting styles), the school (e.g. teachers' attitudes and involvement) and peer group (e.g. peer pressure, competition). Gouws et al. (2000) distinguishes between intrinsic (inner drive to achieve) and extrinsic motivation (prompting from someone else) and states that a balance of both aspects is important for adolescent motivation to achieve and enrich him/herself.

**Cognitive development.** Many researchers concur that cognitive development accelerates markedly during adolescence (Levine, 2003; Berger, 2003, Gouws et al., 2000; Woolfolk, 1998) and requires continuous development of perception, conceptualisation, insight, imagination, knowledge and intuition (Gouws et al., 2000). Piaget's developmental theory describes this stage of adolescence as the formal operational stage (age 12 through to adulthood), during which the adolescent develops a rational and lateral way of thinking, or in other words critical consciousness (Gouws et al., 2000), a logical way of solving abstract problems, as well as to question and examine social, political and religious systems (Gouws et al., 2000; Woolfolk, 1998; Rice, 1990).

Mastery of these challenges does not only form adolescent learners, but it also influence the way in which they will adapt to life in general. These risks also create opportunities (Berger, 2003) to educate and empower adolescents and their support systems to moderate the risk factors associated with adolescent development, especially those

adolescents who are exposed to violence in their communities. It is thus of extreme importance that adolescents are supported and effectively guided to excel through these challenges.

In the next section the impact of exposure to violence in the various systems of adolescent development, with specific reference to the influence that violence has on academic achievement, will be discussed.

### **Exposure to Violence: the Impact on Adolescents and the Outcomes thereof**

The various forms of violence that adolescents are exposed to include physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, familial violence, neglect and negligence. These acts all have in common that within the context of a relationship it can result in the potential or actual harm to an adolescent's development, health, survival or dignity (World Health Organisation, 1999).

### **Incidences of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Associated Symptoms**

Exposure to violence has been linked to trauma symptoms and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in adolescents (Drell, Siegel, & Gaensbauer, 1993; Overstreet & Braun, 2010; Phynoos et al., 1987; Scheeringa, Zeanah, Drell, & Larrieu, 1995; Ward, Flisher, Zissis, Muller, & Lombard, 2001). The following symptoms were identified in research conducted over the past 30 years: anxiety (Fletcher, 1996; Garbarino et al., 2002; Johansen, Eilertsen, Nordanger, & Weisaeth, 2013), high levels of fearfulness (Garbarino et al., 2012; Martinez & Richters, 1993; Pattona, Woolleyb, & Hong, 2012), social problems (Bowen, Richman, & Bowen, 2002; Dyson, 1990; Gorman-Smith & Toan, 1998; Pynoos, 1994), depression (Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Pynoos et al., 1987) and somatic complaints (Miler-Perrin & Perrin, 2012; Pynoos & Eth, 1985).

In a study conducted by Enzink, Robertson, Zissis, and Ledger (1997) in Khayelitsha, South Africa, it was found that 21% of a sample of 60 children who were directly exposed to violence, met the criteria for PTSD with common symptoms such as intrusive recollections, irritability, difficulty concentrating and intense distress. Ward et al. (2001) investigated adolescent PTSD prevalence in private schools in the Western Cape and reported that 5.8% of adolescents who was a witness or a victim of violence met the criteria for PTSD. Results from international studies have found that between 27 % (Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993) and 34.5% (Berman, Kurtines, Silverman, Lourdes, & Serafani, 1996) of adolescents who have been exposed to violence met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD.

Scientific studies on the effects that PTSD has on school performance have flourished in recent years. In a study by Bremner and Marmar (1998) the relationship between PTSD and school performance has not been found to be significant. There was however a significant relationship between exposure to violence and school performance.

**Memory deficits as a result of trauma (due to violence exposure).** Recent studies resulted in important insights into understanding memory deficiencies in children. Noteworthy examples include the effects of emotion on children's memory (Goodman, Quas, & Ogle, 2009; Howe, Toth, & Cicchetti, 2011), long-term memory for childhood experiences (Bauer, 2006), the neural mechanisms that underlie the development of various mnemonic processes (Paz-Alonso, Ghetti, Donohue, Goodman, & Bunge, 2008) and the effect of stress on memory in young adults (Ball, Wellman, & Rebec, 2009).

A study conducted by Elbert, Schauer, Schauer, Huschka, Hirth, and Neuner, (2009) on 420 Sri Lankan school children evaluated the consequences of traumatic experiences on academic achievement (school grades). The outcomes were consistent with research findings that stress impaired hippocampal functions (McEwen, 2002; Kim & Diamond, 2002;

Sapolsky, 1992), which in turn decreased memory tasks, as hippocampal functioning is susceptible to disruption by stressful and traumatic experiences.

According to Steele (2007), it is of vital importance to understand that trauma is a sensory experience, and not a cognitive process. He completed a study on the impact of trauma on learning and behaviour, and explained that victims became 'frozen' in a heightened state of arousal where they are in constant fear for their own safety. Bremner, Randall, Scott, Capelli, Delaney, McCarthy, and Charney (1995) argued that survivors of physical and sexual abuse produced significantly lower memory volume in the hippocampal brain area, where processing of information occurs, compared to the non-abused control group. Perry and Szalavitz (2006) added that due to the altered functioning of the neocortex, it becomes extremely difficult to process information. Steele (2007) explains this by referring to the patient who cannot remember what the physician had said when he outlined the consequences of a life-threatening illness.

Various studies (Gueze, Vermetten, Ruf, de Koet, & Westenber, 2008; Wolfe & Charney, 1991) have demonstrated that a traumatised individual's memory impairments reach beyond a diminished ability to remember specific aspects of the trauma. These studies have concluded that the impairments radiated to everyday memory in daily living. In the view of Conte and Schuerman (1987) and Shanok, Welton and Lapidus (1989), traumatised children will use their emotional energy to suppress traumatic experiences, thus disrupting cognitive development. Since memory plays such an important role in all aspects of learning, memory problems that adolescent learners experience as a result of violence exposure can have a detrimental effect on these adolescent learners' academic performance.

Numerous studies have documented that academic achievement is negatively influenced by the trauma of violence. Pynoos et al. (1987) established that violence exposure

is associated with attention problems as well as with lower cognitive functioning. Violence exposure has also been associated with classroom behavioural problems (Dyson, 1990), decreased school attendance (Bowen & Bowen, 1998; Hurt, Malmud, Brodsky, & Giannetta, 2001), grade repeats (Lipshitz, Rasmusson, & Anyan, 2000; Schwab-Stone, Ayers, Kaspro, Voyce, Barone, & Shriver, 1995), lower reading ability (Delaney-Black, Covington, Ondersma, Nordstrom-Klee, Templin, & Ager, 2002) and achievement problems (Delaney-Black et al., 2002; Duplechain, Reigner, & Packard, 2008; Hurt et al., 2001; Pynoos & Eth, 1985). Lipshitz et al. (2000) studied grade repeats among adolescent girls and found that girls with PTSD symptoms were significantly more likely to fail a grade, to be suspended from school or to be arrested than girls without PTSD. It is thus evident from the above research that the influence of violence on the academic achievement of adolescent learners cannot be ignored.

**Display of aggressive behaviour.** Many research studies point to the fact that when school-aged children are exposed to violence in their communities, it leads to an increase in aggressive behaviour (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994; O'Keefe, 1994; Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson, & Zak, 1985). Ronen (1997) believes that the many changes that adolescents experience during this notoriously turbulent and pressurised developmental period contributes to a sharp rise in the incidence of aggression. These daily life challenges, coupled with exposure to violence, have been found to be associated with a variety of violent actions and high risk behaviours in secondary school students, such as carrying knives and guns, fighting and aggressive behaviour (Bell & Jenkins, 1993; Cooley-Quille, Turner, & Beidel, 1995; Du Rant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens, & Linder, 1994; Jenkins & Bell, 1994; Saltzman, 1995).

Many studies around the world concur that increased aggressive behaviour in children was one of the most frequently recurrent characteristics of living in communities with high incidences of violence (Chimienti, Nasr, & Khalifeh, 1989; Cummings, Iannotti, & Zahn-

Waxler, 1985; Frey, 1988; Liddell, Kvalsvig, Qotyana, & Shabalala, 1994). Aggressive behaviour in turn has been linked to anxiety, concentration problems and a sense of futurelessness (Lorion & Saltzman, 1993), which inevitably has an influence on academic achievement.

In view of the findings in the literature, it is evident that adolescents who have been exposed to violence, frequently display increased violent actions (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1995; McNally, 1993) and aggression (Raia, 1995; Saltzman, 1995; Singer, 1986), as well as difficulties with memory and concentration (Layne, 1996). In addition to being associated to the above-named aspects, all of these factors adversely influence academic achievement (Berthold, 2000).

However, these findings that indicate a relationship between violence exposure and academic achievement are contradicted in other instances. Attar et al. (1994) could not establish that stressful life events and particularly exposure to violence negatively influence school achievement, nor does violence exposure negatively influence reading achievement. Overstreet and Braun (1999) found that community violence has no adverse effect on academic performance. Rosenthal and Wilson (2003) provided evidence that exposure to community violence and psychological symptoms do not influence college performance.

In view of the research findings discussed above, the link between adolescents' exposure to violence, traumatic experiences and academic performance, although not conclusively established, is evident (Shavers, 2000). However, the psychological effects of trauma, associated with exposure to violence, have been scientifically linked with negative psychological consequences (Duplechain et al., 2008) and should therefore be addressed as a way to deal with current impediments in academic achievement.

In the next section social support will be defined, followed by a discussion of the value that social support might have in buffering the influence that violence has on the academic achievement of adolescent learners.

### **Social Support**

Social support is defined by Gurung (2006) as being valued, respected, cared about and loved by others, and can encompass tangible interventions from others (such as appraisal of situations, coping strategies and emotional support) and serves to assist individuals in coping better with challenging situations.

Research on the role of social support goes back as far as the 1970's, when researchers hypothesised that the positive effects of social support emanates more from an individual's perceived benefit of a support relationship than from the actual supportive behaviours of the relationship (Cassel, 1976; Cobb, 1976). Israel and Schurman (1990) describe social support as the physical and psychological comfort given to an individual by family, friends and/or significant people in his/her life. Various studies (Calvete & Connor-Smith, 2006; Cutrona et al., 1994; Steinberg & Darling, 1994; Villanova & Bownas, 1984), as previously indicated, reinforced the theory that support from family and friends have a significant influence on academic achievement, as learners who feel that there is someone there to help them will perform well in their academic life.

### **Value of Social Support in the Enhancement of Adolescents' Well-being**

Nahid and Sarkis (1994) reported that social support serves as a protective barrier, thus moderating the effects of stressors on well-being during a life crisis such as bereavement or illness. Research further suggests that social support can buffer the negative effects and environmental impact of high-risk schools and neighbourhoods (Alexander, Enwisle, &

Horse, 1997; Bowen & Chapman, 1996; Morrison, Robertson, Laurie, & Kelly, 2002).

High levels of social support can alleviate the negative impact of psychosocial stress on behavioural (Crockenberg, 1987), mental (DeGarmo et al., 2008; Treharne et al., 2007) and academic results (Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

Various researchers indicate that it is the quality, and not the quantity of perceived social support that contributes to learners' adjustment and well-being (Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1995; Nahid & Sarkis, 1994). Yasin and Dzulkifi (2011) distinguish between perceived and received social support and conclude that both types of support has a stress-buffering and enhanced coping effect. White (2009) in turn notes that research indicates that the mere perception or belief of social support holds positive implications for the adolescent, even if the support is not utilised. According to Malundecki and Demaray (2006), both the source (e.g. parent/family, peers/classmates and teachers) as well as social support from each source produce beneficial outcomes for adolescent learners. Supportive peer relations can serve as a protective mental health function as it has been linked with a drop in peer victimisation (Hodges et al. 1999), as well as with lower rates of anxiety and depression (Crockett, Iturbide, Torres-Stone, McGinley, & Carlo, 2007) in adolescent learners.

### **Value of Social Support for Academic Achievement**

Positive perceptions of teacher support does not only keep learners interested in academic work, but it also promotes mental wellness as it has been linked with increased levels of life satisfaction (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008), which in turn may lead to better grades and positive peer relationships (Wentzel, 1998).

Researchers also noted that the quality of care and support provided by family, as well as other support structures, buffers the post traumatic effects of learners exposed to violence, as found by Ofofokun (1997). Other research has found that the contribution of support

networks play an invaluable role in the prediction of school engagement (Morrison et al., 2002). Bowen and Chapman (1996) specifically examined the influence of poverty, neighbourhood danger, social support and individual adaptation among at-risk youth in urban areas and concluded that parental support buffered the negative consequences of neighbourhood danger.

On the contrary, research has consistently indicated that a lack of social support can be linked to poor psychological (Garnefski & Diekstra, 1996), health-related (Frey & Rothlisberger, 1996), academic (Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998) and social (Demaray & Elliot, 2001) outcomes for adolescent learners. In a study conducted by Yasin and Dzulkifi (2011) it was found that there is a significant negative correlation between social support and psychological problems, thus suggesting that high social support lowers psychological problems. Mental health problems have been explicitly linked to significant negative impairments regarding an adolescent's quality of life and academic success, and this negative impact continues well into adulthood (Knopf, Park, & Mulye, 2008). One factor identified in trauma literature that prevents adolescents from recovering from trauma is a lack of social support, which may further increase adolescents' risk of developing psychological problems (Phynoos, Steinberg, & Wraith, 1995; Rutter, 1990).

Eskin (2003) believes that deficits in social support relates to problems such as depression, loneliness and anxiety while Elliot and Grambling (1990) is of the opinion that social support can elevate such psychological problems.

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**Part 2 – Article****Perceptions regarding the role of social support in academic achievement of adolescents exposed to violence.****Lelanie Judeel****Ansie Elizabeth Kitching\****North-West University, South Africa*

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*This study explored the perceptions regarding the role of social support in academic achievement of adolescents who have been exposed to violence. A qualitative case study research design was applied to gather data through individual interviews with two male and six female adolescent learners between 15 and 17 years of age. The results indicate that encouragement to achieve, the provision of care and support to deal with problems in a proactive manner and enabling relationships with significant others, facilitated academic achievement despite exposure to violence. Positive self-talk, self-discipline and coping behaviours were identified as self-supportive behaviour that enabled adolescents to achieve academically. The findings indicate that social support might play a significant role in the facilitation of academic achievement for adolescents to achieve academically despite being exposed to violence.*

*Keywords: Social support, academic achievement, early adolescence, violence exposure, South Africa*

Violence has become a commonplace for children and adolescents worldwide (Copeland, Keeler, Angold & Castello, 2007; Van der Kolk, 2005). According to Zinzow, Ruggiero, Resnick, Hanson, Smith, Saunders and Kilpatrick (2009), adolescents are at particular risk for exposure to violent trauma.

In the South African context, political violence has significantly reduced since the first democratic South African elections in 1994, yet violence in the form of home robbery, street robbery, murder, sexual attacks and assault has increased, as indicated in reports on extremely high violence levels (National Victims of Crime Survey, 2012). Research in the SA context indicates that adolescents in particular suffer as a consequence of the violence on a daily basis (Barbarin & Richter, 2001; Ensink, Robertson, Zissis & Ledger, 1997; Seedat, Nymai, Njenga, Vythilingum & Stein, 2004; Seedat, Van Nood, Vythilingum, Stein & Kraminer, 2000; Ward, Flisher, Zissis, Muller & Lombard, 2011). A study by Seedat et al. (2004) found that more than 80% of school-going adolescents experienced at least one trauma in their lifetimes (with an average of two), as described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed., text rev.; DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

The most prevailing traumas in South Africa (National Victims of Crime Survey, 2012) are witnessing community violence (i.e. street, neighbourhood and school violence; 63%), being robbed or mugged (35%) and witnessing a family member hurt or killed (33%). Shields, Nadasen and Pierce (2008) examined adolescents attending township schools in Cape Town, and discovered high rates of exposure to school, neighbourhood, gang and police violence. They also found that exposure to community violence in the neighbourhood was

the most frequent form of violence exposure, followed by hearing about violence from others. They furthermore indicated that these forms of community violence are highly interrelated. According to Buckner, Beardslee and Bassuk (2004) and Isaacs (2010) exposure to violence, in whichever form it might be, has been proven as one of the most damaging experiences a child or adolescent can encounter, with extensive evidence indicating a range of negative psychosocial outcomes. Local and international researchers agree that community violence, in particular, critically impacts the well-being of children and adolescents (Muller, Goebel-Fabrizi, Diamond & Dinklage, 2000; Henrich, Schwab-Stone, Fanti, Jones & Ruchkin, 2004; Raviv, Raviv, Shimoni, Fox & Leavitt, 1999; Schwartz & Proctor 2000; Brady, Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2008).

The research literature indicates that the link between exposure to violence and academic achievement has been explored for the past twenty-six years. Pynoos, Frederick, Nader, Arroyo, Steinberg, Eth and Nunez (1987) found that violence exposure is associated with attention problems, as well as with lower cognitive functioning. Dyson (1990) indicated that violence exposure is associated with classroom behavioural problems. In a study by Shavers (2000), the interrelationship between exposure to community violence and trauma, behavioural patterns and academic performance among urban school aged children were examined. Results were consistent with previous research, which indicated a significant relationship between exposure to violence, behaviour patterns and academic performance among student participants.

Research conducted by De Prince, Weinzierl and Combs (2009) demonstrates the link between executive functions performance (e.g. directing attention, manipulating information in working memory and self-monitoring) and trauma-exposed status in an ethnically diverse sample of children in the United States. The research concluded that exposure to familial violence, relative to non-familial and no violence exposure, was associated with lower

performance on a battery of tests that assessed working memory, behavioural inhibition, processing speed, auditory attention and inference control. Trauma, according to Steele (2007), is a sensory experience that may cause a heightened state of arousal, which leads to significantly lower memory volume in the hippocampal brain area, where processing of information occurs (Bremmer, Randall, Scott, Capelli, Delaney, McCarthy, & Charney, 1995).

Furthermore, Delaney-Black, Covington, Ondersma, Nordstrom-Klee, Templin and Ager (2002) indicate that violence exposure is associated with lower reading achievement. Violence exposure has further been linked to decreased school attendance (Bowen & Bowen, 1998; Hurt, Malmud, Brodsky, & Giannetta, 2001), grade repeats (Lipschitz, Rasmusson, & Anyan, 2000; Schwab-Stone, Ayers, Kaspro, Voyce, Barone, & Shriver; 1995), as well as academic achievement problems (Delaney-Black et al., 2002; Duplechain, Reigner & Packard, 2008; Hurt et al., 2001).

Concurrently, research on social support and academic achievement was conducted since 1984. Various studies conducted over this period reinforce the theory that support from family and friends have a significant influence on academic achievement (Calvete & Connor-Smith, 2006; Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russel, 1994; Villanova & Bownas, 1984).

Israel and Schurman (1990) describe social support as the physical and psychological comfort given to an individual by family, friends and/or significant people in his or her life. Gurung (2006) defines social support more widely as being valued, respected, cared for and loved by others. Nelson and Prilleltensky (2010), distinguish between instrumental and emotional support. Instrumental support refers to the provision of resources, while emotional support refers to acts of listening and showing empathy.

Although numerous studies have provided evidence of a positive correlation between support and well-being, Cohen and Wills (1985) distinguish between two diverse processes, which are described in the earlier literature. The buffering model posits that support protects the adolescent from the influences of stressful incidents, whilst the main effect model (Moose & Mitchell, 1982; Reis, 1984; Wills, 1985) maintains that social support benefits adolescents, regardless of whether they are under stress. According to Shumaer and Brownell (1984), social support has both health-sustaining and stress-reducing functions. The stress-reducing function buffers consequences in the presence of stress (Depner, Wethington, & Korshaven, 1982; House, 1981), whilst the health sustaining function improves the well-being of the recipient in the absence of stress.

More recent research confirms both these processes. Bowen and Bowen (1998) found that social support by parents and teachers serves as a protective buffer in facilitating school engagement, especially among disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, social support buffers the negative effects and environmental impact of high-risk schools and neighbourhoods (Alexander, Enwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Bowen & Chapman, 1996; Morrison, Robertson, Laurie & Kelly, 2002). High levels of social support can also alleviate the negative impact of psychosocial stress on behavioural (Crockenberg, 1987), mental (DeGarmo Patras, & Eap, 2008; Treharne, Lyons, Booth, & Kitas, 2007) and academic results (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Morrison et al. (2002) state that social support is important in the lives of adolescents, and seems to moderate the effect that exposure to violence have on academic achievement. Garbia-Reid, Reid and Peterson (2005), in research with Latino youth, identified social support as one of the salient predictors for positive school outcomes, besides parental supervision and classroom participation.

Yasin and Dzul kifli (2011) distinguish between perceived and received social support and conclude that both types of support has a stress-buffering and enhanced coping effect.

White (2009) in turn notes that, according to research, the mere perception or belief that social support is available holds positive implications for the adolescent, even if the support is not utilised. According to Malecki and Demaray (2006), both the source (e.g. parent/family, peers/classmates and teachers) as well as social support from each source produce beneficial outcomes for adolescent learners. Supportive peer relations can serve as a protective mental health function, as it has been linked with a drop in peer victimisation (Hodges & Rahe, 1999), as well as with lower rates of anxiety and depression (Crockett, Iturbide, Torres-Stone, McGinley, & Carlo, 2007) in adolescent learners. Positive perceptions of teacher support do not only keep learners interested in academic work, but it also promotes mental wellness, as it have been linked with increased levels of life satisfaction (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008), which in turn may lead to better grades and positive peer relationships (Wentzel, 1998).

On the contrary, research has also indicated that a lack of social support can be linked to poor psychological (Garnefski & Diekstra, 1996), health-related (Frey & Rothlisberger, 1996), academic (Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998) and social (Demaray & Elliot, 2001) outcomes for adolescent learners.

McCart, Smith, Saunders, Kilpatrick, Resnick and Ruggiero (2007) suggested that researchers should shift their focus to explore ways of buffering the negative effects of violence. Social support is seen as one of those buffers and should therefore be explored. Various ways in which social support buffer the negative effects of violence were examined in relation to the impact of violence on adolescents. However, there has been a paucity of empirical research on the role of social support on the academic achievement of learners who are exposed to violence. This study focussed on this gap in the research. In view of the limitations regarding the provision of support currently experienced in Education Support Services in South Africa (Pillay & Wasielewski, 2007), the intention with this research was to

contribute to the development of alternative strategies to facilitate sustainable support for those who do not have access to support.

In the study reported in this article, the perceptions of adolescents who have been exposed to violence in their communities were explored with the aim of establishing how social support contributed to their academic achievement amidst the exposure to violence. The research question addressed in the empirical study was: *How do adolescents who are exposed to violence, perceive the role of social support in facilitating their academic achievement?*

The bio-ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) provides a framework for understanding the multiple levels of influences on the developmental outcomes of adolescents. Based on Bronfenbrenner's model the focus was on the interactions among proximal processes, personal characteristics, contexts and time (PPCT) and how these combine to affect adolescent development. Perceived social support and academic achievement were both outcomes of interest. Concerning perceived social support, the proximal processes of interest concerned adolescent-parent, adolescent-teacher, adolescent-peer interactions. Personal characteristics of adolescents who were exposed to violence and still achieve academically were of particular significance. Regarding contexts, proximal processes and personal characteristics within these contexts were represented by the quality of the perceived or received social support of adolescents. The adolescents' role in changing their contexts are either relatively passive, more active or most active (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield & Brink, 2009). For passive adolescents, the way that others react to them are based on demand characteristics, which has the capacity to either provoke or discourage reactions from the social environment, that either nurture (e.g. happy adolescent) or disrupt (e.g. hyperactivity) psychological processes of growth. More active adolescents change their resource characteristics, or in other words their biopsychological liabilities and assets whether

physical (e.g. caring parents, educational opportunities) or mental and emotional resources (e.g. past experiences, skills). Change in the environments of the most active adolescents are linked to their dispositions or force characteristics which can mobilise proximal processes and sustain their operation (e.g. responsiveness to initiatives or the determination to do so) or conversely limit or prevent their occurrence (e.g. aggression and violence). Contexts, or nested structures (Bronfenbrenner & Cetti, 1994) in the lives of adolescents exposed to violence include microsystems (immediate environment where proximal processes are played out e.g. home, school, community) the mesosystems (interrelationship between home, school, peer groups and the community) macrosystems (attitudes and ideologies of the SA society, such as gender and racial discrimination, religious and cultural practises) and the exosystem (e.g. educational system, parental work stress). These systems all interact with the chronosystem (time dimension) in an attempt to maintain a dynamic balance (Swart & Pettipher, 2011).

Besides understanding the adolescent as an individual who functions within the bio-ecological systems, it is also vital to consider the psycho-social developmental of the adolescent by applying the development theory of Erikson (1956). The theory identify this developmental stage as identity versus confusion to indicate a period where major crises regarding the identity of the person must be resolved to allow the adolescent to develop into a socially and emotionally healthy adult. Steinberg & Darling (1994) describes this period of heightened vulnerability as a time when the adolescent is inundated with challenges, such as rapid physical growth (Berger, 2003) that involves hormonal changes, body image and social development. Further challenges, according to Gouws, Kruger and Burger (2000) include the development of independence and autonomy and the formation of sustainable relationships.

The conative development or the maturation of the adolescent's motivation and decision-making, as well as cognitive development i.e. perception, conceptualisation, insight,

imagination and intuition, are also critically important for the transition into young adulthood (Gouws, et al., 2000).

Within the conceptual framework described above, the theory of social support (Shumaer & Brownell, 1984; Depner et al., 1982; House, 1981) provided valuable insights into understanding the perceptions of adolescents in this study.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

The research conducted in this study is intended to develop a baseline understanding of the way in which adolescent learners, who were exposed to violence, perceive the role that social support played in their academic achievement. A qualitative collective, within site case study design (Yin, 2009) was applied to explore the role of social support in the academic achievement. Eight Grade 9 learners from the same secondary school in Gauteng were used as a bounded case based on their academic achievement despite exposure to violence in their communities.

The role of social support in the facilitation of academic achievement for adolescents exposed to violence was described and interpreted from a bio-ecological systems perspective, to gain a better understanding of what is known and not known on the basis of the empirical evidence that was obtained in this study.

### **Participants and Setting**

The population for this study was adolescent learners (between the ages of 15 and 17 years) in a secondary school described above. The school is managed as a non-profit organisation, only receives partial government subsidies, has 24 teachers and 450 learners.

The school aims to address the need for quality education in a township area where many children are exposed to violence in the community. The school was considered as an appropriate contexts (Niewenhuis, 2007) based on the extent to which learners in the school were exposed to violence in their communities (South African Police Service, 2012).

Purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) was used to ensure that participants adhere to specific characteristics (Maree & Pietersen, 2007) that best represent the features of the population the researcher is interested in. Eight adolescents (two male, six female) in Grade 9 were selected as a bounded case, within this specific site, based on the following criteria: They had a proper understanding of English, scored high on a baseline survey on exposure to violence in the community and achieved at least 70% in all school subjects over a period of one year prior to this research study (See Addendum D).

### **Procedure**

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the North-West University (NWU-00060-12-A1 - Perceptions regarding the role of social support in the academic achievement of adolescents exposed to violence). Adolescent learners who met the criteria for inclusion was informed of the research project within their life skills programme. Participation was voluntary and no participant was allowed to participate without completing a consent form for themselves (See Addendum B). Permission was also obtained from parents or legal guardians prior the data collection. Before conducting the interviews, the procedure was piloted with two learners to assess whether rich, deep data can be obtained in the process.

## Data Collection

The researcher drew on multiple sources of information as suggested by Yin (1990), to obtain an understanding of the perceptions of the participants who have been exposed to violence in their communities on the role of social support in their academic achievement.

Documents that provided insight into the participants' contexts and academic achievements, such as school reports and survey's applied in Life-Orientation lessons were obtained with the permission of the principal, the parents and the learners themselves.

Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant to explore their perceptions on the role that social support played in facilitating their academic achievement. Leedy and Ormrod (2001) remarked that the face-to-face interview holds great benefits for the researcher, as it will assist her in establishing a relationship as well as encouraging participant cooperation, which in turn produces higher response rates and provide rich, in-depth data.

Interviews started with the following open-ended question: "*Tell me about your school work and other people in your life*", and were followed by prompts based on the various forms of social support identified in research and questionnaires (See Addendum E). Follow-up interviews were conducted to obtain a more in-depth understanding of how they perceive the role of social support on the various levels of interrelatedness. In these interviews, participants were also asked to map their support networks. Participants were furthermore involved in a group session where they were asked to make collages and each participant was given the opportunity to explain his or her collage (See Addendum G). After the group session, each participant had a final interview in which they were asked to use the collage to assist them with expressing their perceptions on the role of social support as suggested by Makunga and Shange (2009).

## **Data Analysis**

The individual interviews were audio-taped, transcribed (See Addendum F) and analysed thematically. The six stage model as described by Braun and Clark (2006) was used to analyse the data. Thematic coding was done by searching for specific words relating to the role of social support in the academic achievement of early adolescents exposed to violence (See Addendum H). Themes and subthemes were identified and clustered accordingly. Comparisons were then made across the themes to identify connections between the themes, after which the themes were named and defined. Shared analysis that involved a discussion of the collage between the researcher and each participant was applied to give the researcher the opportunity to understand the meaning of the visual data presented in the collages (Theron, Mitchell, & Stuart, 2011).

Trustworthiness was enhanced by ensuring credibility through member checking and self-reflection by the researcher (Creswell, 2007). Thick descriptions of the research process and findings are provided by presenting direct quotations from the transcribed data. Dependability was encouraged by providing extensive descriptions of the research context, procedures and methodology followed to ensure that the research can be repeated in a different context. Lastly, crystallisation as described by Ellingson, (2009) instead of triangulation was used to ensure confirmability, as conversations and visual art were utilised to obtain a clearer understanding of the role that social support plays in the facilitation of academic achievement, or in other words, to gain insight into the unique reality of the participants as it emerged from the data and was reinterpreted by the researcher (Niewenhuis, 2007).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Participants were given clear information on the purpose of the study prior to data collection. As participants are part of a vulnerable group, they were approached via a gatekeeper in the school and invited to participate in the study through their Life-Orientation lessons. The researcher was a guest speaker on career options, and used this opportunity (with consent from the school) to introduce the research project to prospective participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the benefits and possible discomforts as well as the fact that there will be no payment or remuneration for participation. No participant was allowed to participate in the study without giving written assent themselves (See Addendum B), as well as written consent from their parents/legal guardians (See Addendum C). Participants were identified by number only, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity at all times. Participation was voluntary and participants were aware that they can withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time (Hofstee, 2006). Participants were offered individual, free counseling with an independent counselor after the data collection process was completed.

### **Results**

Four main themes were identified regarding the role of social support in facilitating academic achievement as perceived by adolescents who participated in this study.

The themes and subthemes are indicated in the figure below:

<Insert Figure 2 approximately here>.

*Figure 2: Adolescent social support themes and subthemes*

#### **Encouragement to Succeed**

In this study, encouragement to succeed refers to interaction with significant others, including family members and friends that encourage the adolescent to stay positive and focused. These interactions include positive engagements with family and friends, the sharing of success stories, the facilitation of pro-active perspective on life's challenges and emphasising the value of education.

**Encouragement through positive engagements with family and friends.** In this study the participants reported that they have positive engagements with their family members and friends. An example of such an engagement is a conversation where the adolescent was encouraged to stay positive despite challenges. The participant specifically emphasised the positive way in which family members responded to the academic challenges: *“My family is like full of encouragement. They always encourage me even if I am not good at something, they encourage me by saying I can do better. They won't just say... oh.. this is not your subject, or you can't, they just encourage me to try my best. They talk to me and help me to stay positive”*(P3).

In another example, a participant (P4) mentioned that his mother and grandmother engaged with him in a positive way by buying him books when he achieved his goals: *“My grandma does something to help me every day of the year, like when I do good in school like get 80% she buys something for me. And my mother influences me because she buys me books, I really like to read”*.

In one of the collages a participant indicated that the physical things that his parents buy him motivate him and enhance his confidence: *“My parents buy me stuff like clothes, watches, shoes and many more stuff to boost my confidence and that inspires me to work hard”*(P6).

Adolescents in this study also reported positive engagements with their friends and indicated that they commonly perceive their friends as supportive and encouraging. Positive engagements with friends involved talking to one another and doing things together, for example participating in sports or doing fun things together. The following statements confirm these perceptions: *“My friends support me a lot by encouraging me to be focused. They visit me, talk to me and motivate me to come with them to watch football to relax my mind”* (P9), and *“I have got this one friend, he tells me to do my work before I go to the gym or before I do my extramural activities. He encourages me to do my work first”* (P6).

**Encouragement through success stories.** The participants reported that the examples of success stories either observed or being told to them, motivated them to achieve and strive to live self-determined lives.

One participant has a father who achieved well and his dad’s success story inspired him to maintain a certain standard. He is convinced that by working hard he can pass this legacy on to his own children. He stated: *“I put a lot of effort into my work to reach a certain standard. My dad is the CEO of a large company, so I also want to achieve like him. My dad influenced my future so much, I want to be better than him. In my family there is no one that has gotten to his standard, so I want to get there. If I don’t do that, my children will also not do that. I want to prove to my father that I can be successful and make him proud”* (P6).

Another participant reported that her grandmother encourage her by using examples of people who live their lives according to her expectations to provide a reference for the participant to be successful. Concurrently she refers to examples of people whose lives are not good examples, as stated below: *“My grandmother tells me like I should not be like false people or like politicians, she gives me examples of people like how they used to live and say he came from the same background as me, but look at how successful he is right now. She*

*points out people that I admire, and then she gets information on how they used to live. She tells me I must work hard, very hard and be determined, because nothing beats hard work”* (P4).

Participants also mentioned how community members encourage them by sharing success stories during community events. A participant said: *“When there is an event in my community people make a speech to encourage students. Like at a party or so, or when someone graduates or does well, they make a speech and say, do it this way. This is how they encourage children”* (P6).

When asked to give advice on how significant people can provide encouragement to adolescent learners to assist them with their school work, participants suggested the sharing of success stories out of the family and community, thereby reiterating the importance and value of education, as evident from the following statements: *“Family members must sit with learners, talk to them and give them advice such as pointing out a few people in their community who has been successful, and also the ones that did bad stuff. Compare them, and also show them the way of life”* (P4), and *“The older children should be teaching the younger ones, put parents should also get involved and encourage children to learn”* (P5).

**Encouragement to face life’s challenges.** The participants perceived the guidance given by significant others on ways to deal with life’s challenges as encouragement to succeed.

According to the data, the participants’ fathers in particular guided the adolescents to make sense of life and to be prepared for life’s challenges, as illustrated by the following statement: *“My father tells me about life. He helps me to make sense about life, what I am going to find when I grow older and the challenges that I am going to face”* (P4). Mothers, in turn, guided the adolescents to engage with other people and respect other people. One participant stated: *“My mother supports me emotionally because she tells me about life, how to talk to people,*

*how to respect any other person. She tells me that it will get me far in life if I show respect to those who can help me” (P6).*

The community also gave adolescents perspective on life’s challenges. The participants indicated that during conversations with these members of the community, they are encouraged to deal with problems, as illustrated by statements such as: *“There are adult grandfathers in my community that I can talk to, and they tell me this is how we used to deal with problems. When I did a lot of fighting this man told me, you are not a man if you fight, you cannot continue like this, you need to behave well my man. He gives me examples of how to be a man” (P6).*

**Encouragement through emphasis on the value of education.** Significant others in the lives of the participants reportedly emphasise the value of education and therefore challenge them and teach them to be accountable and reach their own goals and dreams. Families, teachers as well as the community play a critical role in this regard.

The participants reported that their families consistently encourage them to stay focused on their academic work. The challenges take various forms. In some instances participants are expected to set an example for younger siblings: *“As I am the oldest my family tells me that my siblings are looking up to me, so that pushes me to be more focused on school work and less on outside things that are happening in my community” (P4).* In other instances, by making an effort to check that their work is done, as indicated in the following statements: *“Sometimes I say I have only three home works and really I have eight, because I don’t feel like doing it. Then my mother would check all my books to see what is going on, she checks my homework and spends time with me and helps me. My mother is a good person, she is funny and kind, but most of all she helps me to stay focused” (P7),* and *“My parents take my*

*phone when it is time for me to study. My dad taught me a lot of study techniques, like writing summaries. So my parents provided me with tools of how to learn” (P6).*

Participants suggested that families set boundaries in order to teach adolescents accountability to achieve their goals and dreams: *“Parents should reduce social networking time, so that children can read and study. They should check how much time children spend on the internet and other things that can distract them from their school work. They need to make sure that they don’t have distractions like the TV” (P6).*

The community furthermore stresses the importance of education and the opportunities that education generate for future success, as demonstrated in the following statements:

*“People in my community normally say go to school, go get an education, this will get you a better future. They say come study in the hall and give others a piece of your mind” (P1),* and *“In my street there is this pastor who tells me that I should do well and make my parents proud, so after he talked to me I am very focused on my school work, and to be successful in life” (P4),* and *“People in the community always tell me when I am walking with my friends.....you girls, don’t do that, school is the most important thing, because boys are not good for you” (P3).*

Teachers also emphasise how education could benefit them in future: *“This one teacher knew that I like soccer, so he came to me and showed me examples and told me soccer isn’t a guaranteed job. He said that I need to put the same effort into my school work” (P4).*

### **Care and Support to Deal with Problems in a Pro-Active Manner**

Care and support to deal with problems in a pro-active manner as a theme refers to the ways in which significant others in the lives of the adolescents respond when the adolescents experience problems.

**Significant others acknowledge and share own mistakes.** The participants reported that the significant others in their lives are willing to admit and discuss the implications that wrong decisions had on their own lives. According to the participants, their parents have openly admitted their own mistakes, and are willing to discuss the implications of their wrong decisions. One participant said: *“My mom helps me to do well in school. She didn’t do well because she dropped out of school; she had a kid in matric. She is trying to show me now it is very difficult to get a job without education or matric. And my granny pushes me very hard; she wants me to be the first successful person in my family”* (P4). Another participant stated: *“My parents always encourage me to do good things with school work; they do not want me to make the same mistakes they did, like not finishing school. Like my mom did not have money to go to college, so she encourages me to go to college. They are not a bad influence to me because they are teaching me what to do, I learn from their mistakes”* (P3).

Members of the communities also actively shared the regrets they have, specifically with regards to their own education: *“In my community there are a lot of projects, they go from house to house and sit down with children and show them the right way to live, even if you are not family. Sometimes they tell us we should not be like them and make the same mistakes, they tell us the truth”* (P5).

**Care and support from family and friends.** According to the participants, significant others cared for them when they encountered problems, ultimately resulting in self-enhancement. Care included verbal and/or emotional support, as well as the actions to support the adolescents to address the stress and emotional trauma associated with the problems. The care was mainly provided by family members and friends.

There was also a common agreement amongst participants that the support of family members played a major role in encouraging them to deal with their problems. Statements to

support this include: *“My mother and dad actually help me to deal with problems, and they took me somewhere to get help from a professional”* (P2), and *“My parents will listen to me when I need to talk. When my uncle died they called someone who I could talk to. They helped me by getting a professional person to talk to me, and it helped me a lot”* (P6).

Familial care and support is furthermore evident in the following examples: *“When I had bad friends, I was behaving like an independent person and at that stage life was really hard. My dad paid for me to go to the gym, I started lifting weights. He told me that if I have problems I should not drink or take drugs, because I cannot solve a problem with a drug in my mind, so that was how I got out of things”* (P7), and *“When bad things happen in my community, I turn to my granny and my uncle, and ask them what to do. And they always say, look, it is very hard now but you have to concentrate on your studies. I follow their advice and respect them a lot because of what they are doing”* (P4), and *“My uncle got stabbed in 2009 in front of me, he died. After the guys got caught I wanted revenge. My dad took me, and he said I had to come live with him so that I can realise in the big world it does not work like that”* (P6).

Participants in this study agreed that their families challenged them to focus on the future despite adversities and the problems associated with these adversities. Responses included the following: *“My grandmother is the one that motivates me a lot, and builds me and tells me when bad things happen in our family or at school that despite everything that goes on around me, I have to concentrate on my school work; because that is the one thing I can be successful in”* (P4), and *“It sometimes breaks me when people say negative things about me, but my mother always tells me, they don’t feed me, I wake up under a roof and that is what matters. She always tells me, forget about them, know that you are loved by me, even if some people want to destroy you, there are some who will motivate you and who want to see you succeed”* (P1), and *“My family tells me not to think about what people say to me, I*

*must just think of who I am and what I am at home. I should not think about what my friends or another person said about me. They tell me to stay positive, even if others say bad things about me” (P3).*

Care from friends included keeping one another updated on school work and providing assistance when they fall behind: *“When my mother got sick, my one friend came to my home and told me what they did when I was away, she came and checked on me to see how I was doing, she is a good friend” (P8), and “When my uncle passed away, I didn’t want to study. My friends said to me hey, you must work if you want to achieve. They came to my house and helped me with Maths and to study. They told me I must practise and practise to achieve in my work” (P6).*

Friends also showed support by encouraging participants to stay focused on the future, despite difficult circumstances. An example of this included: *“When difficult things happen in my life my friends tell me to hold on, it doesn’t just happen to me it happens to everyone. It is just that moment that is difficult and you have to get past it” (P2).*

**Care and support from teachers.** Participants identified teachers as significant others that encouraged them to actively deal with their problems. Responses regarding this included: *“I used to think that fighting solved everything, but after getting in trouble for fighting at school I realised I had to stop. When I got angry I just lost the music you know... My one teacher told me that I had to go for counseling; I had a low self-esteem and needed help. My teacher kept on telling me I had to go, and I didn’t want to go...but in the end I did and it helped me. But I had to decide to work hand-in-hand with this person” (P7).*

When asked about advice on how significant people in their lives could facilitate spaces to assist adolescent learners to deal with problems in a pro-active manner, they indicated that teachers especially could show an interest in adolescents by being aware of their individual

needs. Statements in support of this included: *“Teachers should talk to students as if they are talking to their own children, show them the way. They should point students out, keep them after school and ask them all sorts of questions and try to motivate them to still do well in school”* (P4), and *“Teachers should ask learners how they are handling things, and if they don’t cope, why, and they should be given someone to consult with. Teachers should ask learners to write journals of their lives, and then look at them and talk to them about it. If they can’t help them, they need to get someone professional to help them”* (P2).

### **Enabling Relationships with Significant Others**

In the context of this study, relationship refers to having supportive, positive, fulfilling relationships with members of one's communities (e.g. parents and families, school, friends).

**Trusting relationships with family and friends.** Participants generally indicated that they seek trusting and reliable relationships with significant others. Statements such as *“I can trust my best friend who is doing the same things as me, but I cannot trust friends who are doing the opposite. The ones that I trust are the ones who are willing to achieve more”* (P4), and *“The one friend that I can trust is my mother, my mother is very good to me. My mother supports us even though she can’t do a lot for us, even though we ask her she promises us and keeps her promise, even if it takes a long time. Even though we do not live a high standard of life, we are happy”* (P1), and *“I have a few friends from school, I think they can help me and tell me where I go wrong or tell me what to do or how to stay strong”* (P4), signifies this longing from adolescent learners.

Participants consistently indicated that they search for, and engage in nurturing and trusting relationships with friends. Responses regarding this included: *“I can trust my friends because they can also trust me – we share each other’s problems. Each morning we talk about what happened in our lives, or what happened at home. They actually tell me*

*everything is going to be OK. We also do homework together and study together” (P4), and “My friends support me during difficult times by encouraging me not to think about bad things. They make me feel happy in a way that they make me forget about bad things that are happening” (P3). Participants further emphasised the value of friendships: “Help your friends by telling them it is going to be OK. Try to do something fun with a friend, even though they are struggling with something, have fun and laugh with them. Spend time together” (P1).*

Trusting parental relationships were also perceived by participants as valuable support systems. The following statements support these perceptions: *“I don’t bottle up my problems, I talk to my parents because a mother always has a plan, she will come up with something. It is like taking a bottle and keeping on filling and filling it, it will become full and then there is no space for me or anything. And when I need help, I know that I am not alone, for every problem there is a solution. I feel loved, people may not always show it but deep down I know that I am loved” (P7), and “The relationship I have with my mom and dad, they support me when I go through difficult times. My mother doesn’t really help me with my school work, because my school work is above her. My father was a principal before, so he helps me with my school work” (P6).*

**Facilitating resistance to negative influences.** With regards to resisting negative influences, participants emphasised that significant others consistently encouraged them to focus on positive aspects and self-enhancement. They indicated that the unconditional acceptance received from their families assisted them to resist peer pressure, as illustrated in the following examples: *“My family tells me not to think about what people say to me, I must just think of who I am, and what I am at home. I should not think about what my friends or another person said about me. They tell me to stay positive, even if others say bad things about me” (P3), and “My family always tells me like...even if my friends tell me I am ugly, my*

*mom or someone in my family will say, no, they are lying, to us you are beautiful, maybe to them you are ugly but to us you are beautiful” (P4).*

When asked about how significant others can assist adolescent learners and facilitate them to resist negative influences, asking for help, talking about their problems and using sport as an outlet was suggested. Statements in support of this included: *“The advice that I would give to other learners is to stay away from gangs. Don’t be scared to go to adults and to ask them for help” (P4), and “Do not let your friends get in the way of your life, don’t let drinks or drugs get in your way. Learners should talk about their problems and collaborate to discuss problems and to find solutions. They need someone to help them and to take their hands, because this will stay with them for the rest of their lives. You need to protect yourself with good friends. Don’t try to stand alone because it is easy to fall” (P7), and “The school needs to provide sports, it helps you. I was always stressed and after sports I feel better. It helped me to get rid of my anger and my stress” (P6).*

**Supportive adolescent-teacher relationships.** Participants commonly agreed that a good adolescent-teacher relationship is of extreme importance, and this relationship facilitated academic achievement, especially during difficult times. The following statements supported these perceptions: *“This one teacher, I got into a lot of trouble and she would stand up for me. She told me that if I don’t stop what I was doing I was going to be expelled, and I would disappoint my parents. She started to realise that I was changing, she showed me those things” (P4), and “When I got into trouble at school the teachers told me that they have an open door, if I need help I can come to them. They played a big role in my change, they even showed me that I am very clever, and I am thankful for them” (P7).*

When asked for advice on how relationships with significant people can support adolescent learners to develop a strong sense of self, the following recommendations were

made by participants: Firstly, participants stressed the preventative value of good adolescent-teacher relationship with statements such as *“Teachers should try to listen and understand what is going wrong at home, try to help like when the mother is not there. They need to help the child before they start to struggle, and so help them in their lives by being there for them”* (P1), and *“Teachers should help learners and show them that they care. They need to check their school work, correct them if they are wrong, and help them if they don’t understand”* (P3).

### **Enabling Self-Supportive Behaviour**

From a relational perspective, self-support is seen as social support. Enabling self-supportive behaviour in this study refers to the decisions and actions that the adolescent takes in order to cope with challenging situations, including the ability to utilise skills learned during past experiences. In this study participants engaged in two forms of self-support, namely positive self-talk and self-discipline.

**Positive and future orientated self-talk.** In this study, positive and future-orientated self-talk refer to the adolescent’s unshakable belief in his/her ability to achieve current and future life goals, as well as to stay fully focused on the task at hand in the face of adversity. The successful adolescent has learned to condition his/her mind to think confidently and is able to overcome frustration or self-critical negativity.

All participants engaged in positive and future-orientated self-talk, the following serves as examples: *“I am positive about my future, because I can see that I am doing well, but there is always space for improvement. I am going to go a long way, and I am going to be successful”* (P3), and *“I will not fail, nothing is going to put me down. I say to myself that whatever storms come, it is fine. I see my future as bright because what I want to do is help people, especially some who has been like poor, or live with single parents, because I am one*

*of them. Poor families who are trying but wants to give up. I want to move on in life, I want to help people. I believe that I can change my future” (P1).*

When participants were asked for advice on how to engage in positive self-talk, they suggested that adolescents focus on the positive, and use visualisation to ‘imagine’ a better future: *“Be positive, be positive at all times, take it step by step. If you stop thinking of all those bad things happening and spend more time on learning and studying, everything will get better in a matter of time” (P4), and “Keep strong and stand up, even if it is hard, because in the future opportunities will come. Keep on helping yourself, because if someone brings you down it is not the end of the world, there is another opportunity in life. The failure that you get now, can open many doors because you now have experience of failure. Try to imagine things...imagine you are living in a castle and being a princess or being whatever you want in the future, living your own life...think about many good things” (P1).*

**Self-disciplined behaviour.** In this study, participants indicated that they are able to take action regardless of their emotional state. Participants found that setting boundaries in particular aided them to sustain such self-disciplined behaviour, as illustrated in the statements: *“I will not be with bad friends, I have to think of the future and live a clean life in my community, so peer pressure doesn’t get to me. It takes a lot of hard work, determination and respecting your peers to be successful in life. I put other things aside when I do my school work, I know if I lose my focus I will not go anywhere in life” (P4), and “I put my school work first before I do anything else. I am responsible for everything that I do, once I start something I must finish it, I will not quit in the middle” (P3).*

Participants also consistently indicated that they actively chose to surround themselves with positive role models, as is evident in the following statements: *“Do not stand alone because then it is easy to fall, protect yourself by surrounding yourself with good friends. I*

*don't let friends, dinks or drugs get in my way*" (P6), and *"I avoid bad people and surround myself with positive people; I don't listen my friends if they tell me to do bad things, I listen to myself"* (P3).

**Coping behaviours.** The participants also reported that they apply coping behaviour to deal with minor to major stresses and trauma in their daily lives. These active coping behaviours may be unconscious, learned behaviour or skills that the adolescent consciously master in order to reduce stress or other intense emotions in a safe way, e.g. sharing, counseling, laughing. Participants identified a variety of coping behaviours that they used on a daily basis to manage stressful situations. Some adolescents used positive self-talk and humor: *"I always keep my feelings inside, I love talking to people but I keep my emotions inside. I go to my room and think and promise myself I will not fail, I write my feelings in a diary or a poem"* (P1), and *"I laugh to get things out of my mind"* (P3). Female participants indicated that they cried to release suppressed emotions, as the following excerpts from the interviews illustrate: *"I deal with problems on my own, I cry and sometimes write things down"* (P1), and *"Sometimes people push me to that limit then I break down and I walk away. I don't like conflict so I just walk away and start crying"* (P7).

Furthermore, participants identified self-encouragement as a way in which they supported themselves not to lose focus. Examples include: *"I tell myself that anything could happen in this life, life has good times and bad times, there is nothing I can do when bad things come, I must just stay strong"* (P3), and *"Sometimes I talk to my mother, but I don't always. I go to my room and think and promise myself that whatever I am going through, I will not fail, I just need to keep on pushing"* (P8).

In addition, participants also identified using physical activities as a way to cope, as illustrated in the following statements: *"I keep on going to the gym and stay active when I*

*have problems to clear my mind” (P6), and “Sport helps me to get things off my mind” (P1).*

Another participant (P2) indicated on her collage that she used music to help her to focus:

*“Whenever I am angry, sad or need to study I listen to music to calm me down”.* It was interesting that when participants were asked for advice on how other adolescents can cope in similar circumstances, more forms of coping behaviours were suggested, especially actively dealing with problems: *“Do not pretend that you are having a good time and that you are OK, do not bottle it up. It is better to talk to someone, or to cry about it, go to a teacher or find someone you can trust, because to can talk to them and deal with your problems rather than taking in out on someone else” (P7).*

### **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions regarding the role of social support in the academic achievement of adolescents, who had been exposed to violence. The results indicate that social support provided by families, teachers and friends were positively associated with sustainable academic achievement. The study therefore suggests that positive social support can buffer the negative effects that exposure to violence has on the academic achievement of adolescent learners.

The participants’ perceptions of what enhanced their academic achievement despite exposure to violence, are consistent with results from previous studies, which indicate that motivation and parental strategies to encourage have a significant impact on the academic development of adolescent learners (Boon, 2007; Marjoribanks, 2005). The value of encouragement to achieve is also supported by Covington’s (2000) theory that motivational factors (e.g. academic objectives and future goals) are predictors of academic performance in adolescence. Parental practices, such as encouraging adolescents to master objectives, promotes the development of competencies within the adolescent which, in turn, will support

academic success (Gonzalez, Doan Holbein, & Quilter, 2002; Turner & Johnson, 2003).

According to Rivikin, Hanusheck and Kain (2005), positive statements made by teachers are perceived as important for academic achievement by adolescents (Burnett, 1999). Teachers thus play an important role in adolescent development, providing guidance and knowledge on how to be sensitive to the multiplicity of experiences and forces competing in the lives of adolescent learners.

Numerous research studies (Blake & Slate, 1993; Campbell, 1989; Elgin, 1980; Goodman & Ritini, 1991; Joubert, 1991) have examined the relationship between positive statements made by significant others and general self-perceptions. The results indicated that positive self-perceptions are greatly dependent on positive interactions and positive statements, and that these statements, made specifically by parents and teachers, are related to children's positive self-talk (Burnett, 1999). The same authors also found that positive statements made by teachers are the most significant predictor of positive self-statements in adolescent learners.

Enabling relationships with significant others were perceived by the participants as important in the academic achievement of adolescents who have been exposed to violence in their communities. These relationships are based on trust, and according to Jang (2001), the home environment of children is positively correlated to their self-perceived confidence. This concept is supported by studies conducted in the 1990's. Chang, McBride-Chang, Steward and Au (1993) found that both the general self-concept and the academic self-concept of children are linked to parental warmth and support. This is also supported by Lau and Pun's findings (1999) that parental evaluations had the greatest impact on children's academic self-concept, whilst research done by Liu (1994) concluded that a significant relationship exists between adolescents' perceived home environment, the social school climate and students' academic self-concept.

The findings of this study replicates the work of Laible, Carlo and Raffaelli (2000), who identified the quality of the relationship that adolescents have with their parents and peers as a distinguishing factor of adolescents who successfully navigate through this developmental stage, such as psychological well-being, school adjustment and pro-social behaviour (Jessor, 1993; Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004).

Misconception regarding attitudes and conflict with parents during adolescence suggested a period of rebellion and antisocial attitudes. Collins and Laursen (2004) deem this as the exception (between 5% and 15%), and believes that most family interactions proceed through adolescence in a relatively stable manner. The parent-adolescent relationships can provide a safe, stable and structured environment within family interactions, as suggested by the findings in this research study.

Research reveals that young people who have most resilience often share certain characteristics (Williams, Barclay, & Schmied, 2004). These include having a support network in the shape of family, friends, teachers etc., confidence that they can face up to new and challenging situations and have enjoyed previous successes on which they can fall back on to remind them that they have overcome adversity in the past (Bernard, 2004).

The results of this study furthermore suggest that self-supportive behaviour is perceived as playing a significant role in supporting adolescents to achieve academically, despite their exposure to violence. Findings regarding self-supportive behaviour were in general in line with the literature, as supported by evidence that adolescents who achieve well academically have the ability to apply positive self-talk (Burnett, 1999).

For the adolescent to gain control over his or her life involves learning and then successfully applying a number of self-determination skills, such as goal-setting, understanding individual abilities and disabilities, problem-solving, and self-advocacy

(Zimmerman, 1990). The personal process of learning, using, and self-evaluating these skills in a variety of settings is at the heart of self-determination (Burgstahler, 2012). Internal assets for development, as identified by Scales and Leffert (2004) for positive youth development, include commitment to learning, positive values for making good choices, social competencies to engage in familiar and new situations, and positive self-concept. The results of this study suggest that these adolescents have successfully mastered the above-named challenges and have gained valuable skills to assist them in continuing to achieve academically.

Duckworth and Seligman (2006) explain that student motivation and engagement play a significant role in learning and academic achievement. They further explain that self-discipline is closely related to motivation, and it is this ability of adolescents to monitor and control their own behaviours or, in other words, their self-discipline that enable them to better focus on long-term goals and make informed choices related to academic engagement. According to Vivo (2011), responsibility is the ability to act without guidance or superior authority, which means internal motivation is a necessity. Adolescent learners need to experience opportunities to develop internal motivation and a sense of right and wrong. Scales and Leffert (2004) identified internal and external assets for positive youth development assisting adolescent learners to achieve their potential. External assets include knowing clearly what family and school expects and a community that provides a safe place with rich opportunities for exploration.

On the contrary, research has consistently indicated that a lack of social support can be linked to poor psychological (Garnefski & Diekstra, 1996), health-related (Frey & Rothlisberger, 1996), academic (Richman et al., 1998) and social (Demaray & Elliot, 2001) outcomes for adolescent learners. In a study conducted by Yasin and Dzulkifi (2011), it was found that there is a significant negative correlation between social support and psychological

problems, thus suggesting that high social support lowers psychological problems. Mental health problems have been explicitly linked to significant negative impairments on an adolescent's quality of life and academic success, and this negative impact continues well into adulthood (Knopf, Park, & Mulye, 2008). Eskin (2003) believes that deficits in social support relates to problems such as depression, loneliness and anxiety, while Elliot and Grambling (1990) are of the opinion that social support can elevate such psychological problems.

This study provided valuable insights into how adolescents perceive social support. In view of the findings of this study, understanding the role of social support in academic achievement of adolescents who are exposed to violence, can provide educators, parents and health care professionals with ways to facilitate support for adolescents in contexts where support services are not readily available.

According to Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) theoretical model of development personal characteristics, supportive teachers (representing both process and contextual factors for this study), and supportive peers and family members (also representing both process and contextual factors) all appeared to contribute to adolescents' academic achievement, despite prolonged exposure to violence. The results also indicated that supportive microsystems (such as proximal relationships with significant others) can serve as a protective factor, especially if this system supports the adolescent's feelings of belonging, love and encouragement. The continuous dynamic interaction and interplay between the multiple influences on the adolescent's life implies that when an adolescent, or any other system such as peer group, family or school experiences difficulties, each with their critical contributing factors, the entire system need to be seen as a whole, synergised system and not a single cause. The results further suggested that the effectiveness of proximal processes are maximised in environments which are stable and predictable over space and

time, such as the supportive relationships which the participants in this study engaged in. Although the enduring patterns of the proximal processes of the adolescents in this study contributed to actualising the genetic potential of adolescent learners, viewed from a bio-ecological perspective, proximal processes on their own cannot produce effective development and academic achievement, they are guided and fuelled by the personal characteristics of the adolescent (such as positive self-talk, self-discipline and coping behaviours) and the nested set of structures or context.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

The study provides a basis for further exploration of the role of social support in the academic achievement of adolescents who are exposed to violence. The results of this explorative study suggest that an in-depth study needs to be conducted to develop guidelines for the application of social support as a strategy that will enable the helping professions to address the current limitations regarding support for adolescents who are exposed to violence.

The implication for practice is that those who provide social support for adolescents (who have been exposed to violence) have a responsibility to equip themselves with the necessary skills to support adolescent learners. Greater awareness and knowledge of the importance of social support in the lives of adolescents need to be created under mental health professionals to aid teachers, parents, families and friends to identify and enhance potential social support networks (Sanders, 2003). Significant others thus need to be informed about the important role that their supportive interactions with these learners play, e.g. in Life-Orientation classes, information evenings with parents, teacher training and friendship support groups. Collaboration between teachers and parents to identify and inform parents about the support needs of adolescents and brain-storming with them about techniques, can increase support and build the relationship between home and school, ultimately providing a safety net for adolescents who may feel overwhelmed by academic or

personal difficulties (Croninger & Lee, 2001). These interactions can also strengthen the adolescent-teacher relationship.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

The study was conducted in a single setting that might not necessarily represent the majority of school contexts in South Africa. Yet the context allowed the researcher to develop a clear understanding of the learners' situation before selecting appropriate participants. Due to the rigorous criteria set for participation (achieving above 70% in all subjects for at least one year prior to the study), only a small sample of participants were identified. In order to overcome these limitations, the researcher therefore collected rich deep data from each participant by applying various methods during multiple interviews with the participants. Leedy and Ormrod (2001) remarked that the face-to-face interview holds great benefits for the researcher, as it assists in establishing a relationship as well as encouraging participant cooperation, which in turn produced higher response rates and provided rich, in-depth data. It is recommended that future research focuses on larger and more diverse samples. Further research could also explore the viability of social support interventions in assisting adolescent learners to achieve their full academic potential, despite exposure to violence.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of the study strongly suggest that social support is perceived as enabling by adolescents who have been exposed to violence. The various forms of social support have made a difference in the lives of adolescent learners and the results imply that social support may vastly contribute to the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning in SA schools. It is advised that significant others in the lives of adolescent learners should be

made aware of their roles and responsibilities in the developmental and academic performance challenges of adolescents who have been exposed to violence.

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### **Part 3 Conclusions Limitations and Recommendations**

#### **Introduction**

The focus of this study was on the role of social support in the academic achievement of learners who are exposed to violence in their communities. The perceptions of eight learners who attend an English private secondary school in a black urban suburb in Gauteng were explored in depth. This school is a non-profit organisation, which receives partial government subsidies, and aims to meet the need of quality education in the local township. The intention of the study was to contribute to the development of alternative ways to provide support and maintain academic achievement of adolescent learners, despite exposure to violence.

The rationale for the study was to address the limited availability of support services for learners who are exposed to violence, due to the human resource shortages in the Department of Education, as well as restricted access to services for adolescents who have been exposed to violence, and are still expected to achieve academically despite the consequences of their exposure.

The problem that this study addressed was identified on two levels. In practice these learners are expected to achieve well, while research strongly indicates that exposure to violence has an effect on their cognitive (Levine, 2003), affective (Berger, 2003), social (Pretorius, Van den Berg, & Louw, 2003), physical (Fern & Thom, 2001) and conative functioning (Gouws, Kruger, & Burger, 2000). Furthermore, a gap was evident in earlier research with regards to possible ways to address the problem of limited support for these learners. In view of research evidence that strongly suggests that social support alleviates the impact of exposure to violence and might have a moderating or buffering effect that will

contribute to the ability to maintain academic achievement, the research question posed in this study was:

*How do adolescents who are exposed to violence, perceive the role of social support in facilitating their academic achievement?*

To address the question, a qualitative descriptive interpretative case study design was applied. As indicated, eight learners, who maintained an average of 70 % in all their subjects over a period of a year while exposed to violence in their communities were individually interviewed in four consecutive sessions that included the use of various data collection methods to establish how they perceived the role of social support in their academic achievement.

In this part of the report the conclusions and recommendation will be discussed with reference to the literature review and the results obtained in this study. The researcher's experience of the process as well as the contribution and limitations of the study will also be presented.

### **Conclusions**

The conclusions presented here are made based on a study of the research literature and the empirical study conducted to explore adolescents' perceptions of the role that social support can play in enhancing sustainable academic achievement amidst exposure to violence in their communities.

The existing literature indicated that violence exposure can have devastating effects on adolescents, as it influences each of the interrelated systems as indicated by the bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1992). Exposure to violence has been linked to PTSD in adolescents (Drell, Siegel, & Gaensbauer, 1993; Overstreet & Braun,

2010; Pynoos, Frederick, Nader, Aroyo, Steinberg, Eth, & Nunez, 1987; Scheeringa, Zeanah, Drell, & Larrieu, 1995; Ward, Flisher, Zissis, Muller, & Lombard, 2001), memory deficits (Goodman, Quas, & Ogle, 2009; Howe, Toth, & Cicchetti, 2011; Paz-Alonso, Ghetti, Donohue, Goodman, & Bunge, 2008), and an increase in display of aggressive behaviours (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994; O'Keefe, 1994; Ronen, 1997; Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson, & Zak, 1985).

Concurrently the literature overview indicated that social support can buffer these devastating effects in both a health sustaining and stress-reducing capacity (Alexander, Enwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Bowen & Chapman, 1996; Shumaer & Brownell, 1984; Yasin & Dzulkifi, 2011). The results of these studies confirm that social support plays a significant role in the academic achievement of adolescent learners.

Based on the empirical study of social support, it can be concluded that the adolescents who participated perceived the following forms of social support as contributing to academic achievement:

Firstly, encouragement by significant others in their lives to succeed through encouraging behaviour involves the sharing of success stories, advising adolescents to face life's challenges and emphasising the value of education. These encouraging engagements between adolescents and significant others might contribute to their success and are therefore considered invaluable in facilitating their academic achievement.

Secondly, care and support provided by family, friends and teachers, who are willing to share their own life experiences, whether successful or unsuccessful, assist the adolescent in dealing with problems in a pro-active manner and therefore overcoming the barriers that they experienced regarding their academic achievement. These pro-active behaviours involved taking adolescents to trained professionals to guide them to deal with difficult life challenges,

creating opportunities for them to participate in physical activities, providing assistance with school work, encouraging them to journal, providing emotional support and verbally motivating them on a daily basis to stay focussed.

Thirdly, enabling relationships with significant others, and especially trusting and reliable relationships with family and friends, proved to be constructive in facilitating adolescents to resist negative influences such as peer pressure. Supportive adolescent-teacher relationships might also be helpful in facilitating sustained academic achievement, as indicated by the results.

Lastly, self-supportive behaviour and more specifically positive and future-orientated self-talk, self-disciplined behaviour and the application of self-coping behaviours might assist adolescents in supporting themselves during difficult times and buffering the negative effects that exposure to violence had on their academic achievement.

Based on the literature overview and the empirical research conducted in this study, the researcher therefore concludes that social support is perceived by adolescents as contributing to sustained academic achievement despite exposure to violence.

### **Recommendations**

Although the study was of limited extent, the results presented offer guiding principles regarding the application of social support as an alternative way to ensure that learners who are exposed to violence maintain academic achievement. The recommendations are structured with reference to the role-players that were identified in this study as playing a significant role in sustaining academic achievement. Recommendations will be made with reference to practice and research.

### **Recommendations Relating to Parents/Caregivers and Other Family Members**

The findings of this study concur with the findings in the research literature that parental involvement significantly benefits a child's academic outcomes. According to research, parental/caregiver involvement in the education of the adolescent is a better predictor of educational success than family income or parental education (Coley, Morris, & Hernandez, 2004; Jeynes, 2003) for adolescents who may feel overwhelmed by violence in their communities. The research findings confirmed that a supportive parent- or caregiver-adolescent relationship can buffer negative peer influences, and parents need to actively steer adolescents towards certain friends and away from others, thus actively lowering the risk of delinquent involvement.

On a practice level, it is therefore recommended that parents and family members of adolescents who are exposed to violence are made aware of the important role that they can play in the academic achievement of these learners. Even though they might not be able to attend meetings, they can be informed by drawing up a pamphlet that informs them about the value that their encouragement can play in the lives of these young people.

In terms of the research it is recommended that further in-depth research is conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the interactive dynamics involved in the support that parents, caregivers and families provide to these adolescents. Further research is also recommended on ways to mobilise the support that is provided by parents, caregivers and family members, in more proactive ways.

### **Recommendations Relating to Teachers and Schools**

It is recommended that teachers are trained, starting during their undergraduate training, receiving on-going techniques and strategies that will structure and maximise the social

support that they offer adolescent learners. Garcia and Guerra (2004) suggest that teachers need to understand the broader spectrum of factors which contribute to school disengagement (such as violence in the context of this study) in order to become better change agents in the lives of these learners. Schools should also contribute to the ecological factors by e.g. creating safe extra-curricular settings on a regular and sustainable basis, serving as a form of natural control (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 1998). In the South African secondary school system each student is assigned a register teacher, with the primary responsibility of administrative tasks. These register class teachers should be trained in the vital social education and support function that they serve in the academic success of adolescent learners.

The research findings also clearly indicated the significant role that teachers can play in not only supporting adolescents during difficult times, but also pre-empting academic failure by nurturing supportive and caring relationships with adolescents. On a practical level it is therefore recommended that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to provide social support, especially in the South African context where violence exposure is very high (National Victims of Crime Survey, 2012).

### **Recommendations for Counsellors**

Sanders (2003) recommends that counsellors should play a key role in the school context by assisting parents, teachers and peer groups to identify and enhance potential support networks. Based on the findings of this study, the researcher, who has experience as a counsellor, strongly recommends that counsellors are made aware of the important role that social support provided by the different role-players can play in the development of such support networks.

Apart from printed materials and educational sessions, counsellors have a responsibility to encourage significant people in the lives of adolescents to review their support practices and to really understand how their actions can positively influence these learners.

### **Recommendations Relating to Peers**

Adolescents need to be made aware of the fact that friendship networks is a source of social capital, which can serve a comfort zone during difficult times (Ryabov, 2009). The suggestions made in this study is in line with Ngai, Cheung, To, Liu and Song's (2013) findings that supportive and pro-social friends, or in other words high-quality friendships, can not only enhance the sense of worth and social connectedness in adolescent learners, but also assist adolescents to cope with demands from school and enhance developmental outcomes. It is suggested that adolescents need to be educated during life-orientation sessions that the quality of friendship networks (i.e. the number of days of mutual assistance and support) are more important than the size of friendship networks (Ngai et al., 2013), as well as equipping them with information on how to support their friends in the most effective ways.

### **Department of Education**

In view of the restraints experienced by the DoE regarding the provision of education support services, it is recommended that the department considers the development of informal support networks through the mobilisation of social support in communities. As all of the participants experienced/observed high levels of violence in their communities, the findings of this study emphasised the need to implement interventions that can enhance the adolescent's sense of safety and foster opportunities for effective social support. The DoE can work hand-in-hand with communities to develop safety enhancement strategies that extend beyond identifying e.g. unsafe settings, and communities should (as suggested by the participants in this study) provide regular and sustained locations with overt physical

boundaries. The DoE should create formal opportunities to inform and educate key players in the community on effective strategies to encourage and support adolescent learners effectively.

### **Contribution of the Study**

This study contributes to the knowledge base on alternative ways to provide support for adolescents who have been exposed to violence, enabling them to continue to achieve academically. The study further adds value to emerging literature by indicating specific ways in which significant people in the lives of adolescents (who have been exposed to violence) can support them. It might also result in insight and can be applied to develop informal ways of supporting adolescents, possibly within diverse contexts, and ultimately make it easier for adolescents to overcome the damaging consequences of violence exposure.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study is of limited extent due to the strict inclusion criteria that was set (aged between 15 and 17 years, high exposure to violence and academic achievement of at least 70% in all school subjects for a period of one year prior to the research study). Furthermore, the researcher developed close relationships with the participants, and was therefore susceptible to subjectivity. In response to this challenge, the researcher did not strive for objectivity, but chose to enter the participants' life-worlds, experiences and perceptions, while constantly reminding herself of the possible danger of being biased by her involvement. She therefore kept a reflexive journal of her experiences and engaged in on-going discussions and reflective engagements with a trusted colleague and her supervisor. She also undertook a comprehensive literature overview, to further counteract any researcher bias.

### Reflections on the Research Journey

*“How can one individual suffer so many misfortunes in his/her lifetime? Why do children have to grow up in dismal township circumstances where they are exposed to serious and violent crimes, as part of their daily lives? Life is certainly not fair, and it surely is a miracle that these children actually finish school, not even to talk about achieving academically under circumstances like these....”*

This excerpt from the researcher’s field notes on the perceptions of adolescents on how social support facilitated their academic achievement, despite being exposed to violence, demonstrates the researcher’s struggle to come to terms with her “researcher as participant” role; a role that is dependent upon her “self”, both the self that she brought to the research setting and the self that she created (or became) in that setting (Reinharz, 1997). Additional documentation in her field notes reflects her feelings: helplessness at her inability to change the circumstances of these participants; annoyance with families and teachers who neglect to engage and support adolescents, and constant feelings of guilt for her privileged upbringing.

Although it is somewhat of a cliché, this study has been a personal journey for the researcher. Coming from a counselling/teacher background, the researcher was well aware of the emotional impact that a research study as this could have. The researcher utilised all her education, training and experience to create a self-consciousness of her responsibility to maintain an image of “*the field as essentially independent*” of her research activities and roles (Emerson, 1983, p. 11).

Such awareness came through her internal dialogues with herself and continuous, intensive scrutiny of what she knows and how she knows it, as she participated in the research process (Hertz, 1997). The purpose of this reflexivity was to enhance the quality of the research through her ability to extend her understanding of how her positions and interests

as a researcher affected all stages of the research process. The researcher's beliefs were frequently very different from those expressed by the participants. Reflexivity helped her to listen to and explore their views without prejudice and judgement, so that she could learn from and understand their life-worlds. As a counsellor and prospective research psychologist, the researcher learned valuable lessons and experienced renewed excitement regarding the immense responsibility and numerous opportunities that are available in the research field.

*“What I've tried to do is combine both my personal experience with scientific research. I like to cross the divide between the personal world and the scientific world.”*

Temple Grandin

### **Final Word**

This study suggests that the multiple environments in which adolescents live can create positive and supportive social relationships, which might provide persuasive incentives for adolescents to continue to focus on achieving academically, amidst exposure to violence. The strengthening of relationships across the various levels of interrelatedness in communities exposed to violence therefore needs to be considered as a way to support adolescents in continuing to sustain academic achievement amidst exposure to violence in their communities.

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**Addendum A: Ethical Consent Forms - Permission for Research Project****Letter to the leadership of the school**

Student: LELANIE JUDEEL

Student number: 23290609

**Submitted as part of the requirements for the Master in Research Psychology degree, North-West University.**

The Leadership

DATE:

Dear Sir/Madam

**Research project: Perceptions regarding role of social support in the academic achievement of adolescents exposed to violence.**

As previously discussed with you, I would like to formally ask permission to start the above-named research project at your school. This project will take place during the months of January to July 2013.

During the research process I will conduct interviews with the identified participants, as well as their parents/legal. Parents/legal guardians, as well as the research participants, will be asked to give permission for these interviews, as well as informed consent to access academic records and career guidance reports.

I would like to thank you in advance for your willingness to make the school and the facilities available and for assisting me in my research project. If you need more information regarding this project, please feel free to contact me, or my study leader (Dr Ansie Kitching on 021 864 3593) at the North-West University.

Please sign at the bottom of this letter, to confirm that the school grants me permission for the above-named research.

Kind regards

---

Lelanie Judeel (student)

---

On behalf of the school

**Addendum B: Ethical Consent Forms - Consent to Participate in Research – Grade 9****Learners**

**Research project: Perceptions regarding the role of social support in the academic achievement of adolescents exposed to violence.**

You are kindly asked to participate in a research study conducted by Mrs L Judeel as part of her Master's in Research Psychology degree at the North-West University. This study will contribute to a research report of limited scope. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a Grade 9 learner, and you achieve well academically despite being exposed to violence in the community.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study aims to explore the role of social support in the academic achievement of adolescent learners who are exposed to violence in their communities.

**1. PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in the study, I will ask you to do the following:

- Attend four sessions with me, Lelanie Judeel. Each of these sessions will take about an hour. In these sessions we will talk and use creative techniques. These sessions will take place in February to April 2013.
- Give permission for me to access your academic record and baseline survey, and to use these documents as part of the research process.

**2. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

If you feel uncomfortable, have any concerns, or would like to discuss any aspects of your life after the sessions, I will bring you into contact with professionals who will be able to support you.

**3. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR SOCIETY**

This project will help you to understand how you manage to achieve academically despite your exposure to violence.

**4. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

There will be no compensation for your involvement. You participate voluntarily and without any expectations set by the researcher.

**5. CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be associated with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission, or as required by law. The information will be kept confidential by not using your name, but rather using a number when referring to you in the research report. The name of your school will not be mentioned anywhere. During the research I will keep all information locked and will be the only person to have access to it. Sessions will be recorded and I will be the only person who will listen to these recordings. The transcriptions of the recordings may be reviewed by two external coders, who will focus on identification of themes. They will sign confidentiality forms. Once the research report is completed and all my examinations are finished, the data will be safely stored at the North-West University for five years.

**6. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You are not obliged to participate and can choose to withdraw at any stage without consequences of any kind. You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain part of the study. The researcher may withdraw you from this research project if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

**7. IDENTIFICATION OF RESEARCHER**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me, Lelanie Judeel, on 082 526 3133 or my study supervisor, Dr Ansie Kitching, on 021 864 3593.

**8. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation in the study, without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in the research study. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this study, please contact my supervisor, Dr Ansie Kitching, on 021 864 3593 at the North-West University.

**9. INFORMED CONSENT AND SIGNATURE**

The information above was explained to me by Lelanie Judeel in English. I am in command of this language or it was translated to me satisfactorily. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to my satisfaction.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name of Grade 9 learner), hereby consent voluntarily to participate

in this study.

I give permission for Lelanie Judeel to gain access to my academic record and baseline survey.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Grade 9 learner

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Grade 9 learner

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of student: Lelanie Judeel

### **Addendum C: Ethical Consent Forms – Parental Consent Form**

**Research project: Perceptions regarding the role of social support in the academic achievement of adolescents exposed to violence.**

Your child has been selected to participate in a research study conducted by Mrs Lelanie Judeel as part of her Master's in Research Psychology degree at the North-West University. This study will contribute to a research report of limited scope. Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study because he/she is a Grade 9 learner and achieve academically despite exposure to violence in the community.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study is to explore the role of social support in the academic achievement of adolescent learners who are exposed to violence.

#### **1. PROCEDURES**

If your child volunteers to participate in the study, I will ask him/her to do to the following:

- Attend four sessions with me, Lelanie Judeel. Each of these sessions will take about an hour. In these sessions we will talk and use creative techniques. These sessions will take place in February to April 2013.
- Give permission for me to access your child's academic record and baseline survey, and to use these documents as part of the research process.

#### **2. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

If your child feels uncomfortable, has any concerns, or would like to discuss any aspects of his/her life after the sessions, I will bring him/her into contact with the professionals who can support him/ her.

#### **3. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR SOCIETY**

This research project aims to establish how secondary school learners can be supported to deal with violence exposure, as well as the impact that it has on their academic achievement.

#### **4. COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION**

Your child will not receive any compensation for his/her involvement.

#### **5. CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study that can identify your child will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with his/her permission, or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by not using his/her name, but rather using a number when referring to him/her in

the research report. The name of the school will not be mentioned anywhere. I will keep all information locked and will be the only person to have access to it. Sessions will be recorded and I will be the only person who will listen to these recordings. The transcriptions of the recordings may be reviewed by two external coders, who will focus on identification of themes. They will sign confidentiality forms. Once the research report is completed and all my examinations are finished, the data will be safely stored at the North-West University for five years

## **6. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your child can choose if he/she would like to participate in the study or not. If he/she volunteers to be part of the study, he/she may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. He/she may refuse to answer any questions that he/she does not want to answer and still remain part of the study. The researcher may withdraw him/her from this research project if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

## **7. IDENTIFICATION OF RESEARCHER**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me, Lelanie Judeel, on 082 526 3133 or my study supervisor, Dr Ansie Kitching, on 021 864 3593.

## **8. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

Your child may withdraw his/her consent at any time and discontinue participation in the study, without penalty. He/she is not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of his/her participation in the research study. If you have any questions regarding his/her rights as a participant in this study, please contact Dr Ansie Kitching on 021 864 3593 at the North-West University.

## **9. INFORMED CONSENT AND SIGNATURE**

I, the parent or legal guardian of \_\_\_\_\_ (name of Grade 9 learner), hereby consent that the above-named learner may partake in this study.

I give permission for Lelanie Judeel to gain access to his/her academic record and baseline survey.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of parent/legal guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Grade 9 learner

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of student: Lelanie Judeel

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Addendum D: Research Participants Profiles****Participant 1**

**Sex:** Female

**Age:** 16

**Violence exposure:** Witnessed people being beaten up/attacked, gang violence & drug dealing, shooting in the neighbourhood, hearing of gunfire, have been hit by a non-family member, witnessed a murder, house burglary, have been threatened by a non-family member, knows someone who has been raped, knows someone who has been kidnapped.

**Academic Performance (2012):** All subjects above 75%

**Participant 2**

**Sex:** Female

**Age:** 16

**Violence exposure:** Have seen someone she knows beaten up and hurt badly by others, have been around people shooting guns, lost a family member due to community violence, have been hit by a non-family member, have been mugged on the street, knows someone who has been raped, have been threatened by gangs.

**Academic achievement:** All subjects above 80%

**Participant 3**

**Sex:** Female

**Age:** 17

**Violence exposure:** Have seen someone she knows beaten up and hurt badly by others, had to stay inside because of gang violence in the neighbourhood, had to hide because of shooting in the neighbourhood, house have been broken into, have been hit by a non-family member, have been threatened by non-family members, have been mugged/see someone being mugged.

**Academic achievement:** All subjects above 70%

**Participant 4**

**Sex:** Male

**Age:** 17

**Violence exposure:** Have been around people shooting guns, gang violence and drug dealing in the neighbourhood, have heard gunfire in the community, had an object thrown at him in the street, have been hit with a blunt object in the street, knows someone who has been raped, have been threatened by someone he knows, had lost a family member due to community violence.

**Academic achievement:** All subjects above 75%

#### **Participant 5**

**Sex:** Female

**Age:** 16

**Violence exposure:** Had seen someone she knows being attacked by others, had to stay inside because of gang violence and drug dealing in the neighbourhood, have heard gunfire while at home, house had been broken into, has been mugged, have been threatened by someone she knows, have been hit by a non-family member.

**Academic achievement:** All subjects above 80%

#### **Participant 6**

**Sex:** Male

**Age:** 17

**Violence exposure:** Uncle was shot in front of his eyes, have seen someone he knows beaten up by others, have witnessed shooting and gang violence in the community, have witnessed intimidation and drug dealing in the neighbourhood, have been hit by a non-family member, house have been broken into, know someone who has been raped, have been threatened by someone he knows.

**Academic achievement:** All subjects above 80%

#### **Participant 7**

**Sex:** Female

**Age:** 17

**Violence exposure:** Have seen someone she knows hurt really badly by others, had to stay inside because of gang violence or drug dealing in the neighbourhood, have heard gunfire while at home, have been hit by a non-family member, knows someone who has been raped, have been threatened by someone she knows, have been hit by a non-family member.

**Academic achievement:** All subjects above 75%

**Participant 8**

**Sex:** Female

**Age:** 17

**Violence exposure:** Have witnessed a murder, knows someone who has been kidnapped, have been threatened by someone she knows, had to stay inside because of gang violence or drug dealing in the neighbourhood, have been hit by a non-family member, knows someone who's house have been broken into, have been mugged in the neighbourhood.

**Academic achievement:** All subjects above 80%

### **Addendum E: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule**

These questions served as a guideline only, the researcher started with open questions and gently prompted the participants to talk about the various forms of social support and how they experience it in their daily lives.

**Tell me about your schoolwork and other people in your life.**

**I would like you to talk to me about your community**, so the town or the local area that you live in. If you had a problem with your schoolwork, are there neighbours who will help you?

Do adults in your neighbourhood encourage young people to get an education? Can you give me examples of how neighbours encouraged you?

Is there anything else that you can tell me about your community or neighbourhood and your schoolwork?

**Let's think about school now.** Do you feel that teachers in your school think that every learner is important?

What gives you that idea?

Do you feel that teachers in your school care about learners?

How in your mind would teachers show that they do care?

How do teachers help you with your schoolwork when bad things happen in your community?

What advice would you give to teachers or schools about how to support learners with their schoolwork when they go through difficult times?

Is there anything else that you can tell me about your teachers and your schoolwork?

**I would like you to talk to me about your friends now.** Do you feel that you can trust your friends?

How do your friends support you with your schoolwork during difficult times?

Can you talk to your friends about bad things that happen in your life or about things that bothers you?

Can you give me an example of how a friend supported you with your schoolwork when you went through a difficult time?

Do your friends talk you into things that you don't really want to do?

What advice would you give to your friends about how to support you with your schoolwork when you go through difficult times?

Is there anything else you can tell me about your schoolwork and your friends?

**Let's think about your family** or the people that supports you the most. How do people in your family support you with your schoolwork when you go through difficult times?

Can you think of examples?

Tell me about your family and your schoolwork.

Can you give me an example of how a family member supported you with your schoolwork when you went through a difficult situation?

What advice would you give to families about how to support learners with their schoolwork when they go through difficult times?

**I would like you to think a bit about yourself now...** how do you feel about your future?

What in your mind does it take to be a successful adult?

How do you support yourself in your schoolwork when you go through difficult times?

Is there anything else that you can tell me about school work and other people in your life?

What advice would you give to other Grade 9 learners who do witness a lot of violence in their communities about how to cope with their schoolwork during difficult times?

Is there anything that you would like to add or ask about what we have said throughout our talk?

**Addendum F: Example of Transcript (Excerpt)**

1 Interview: Research participant  
 2  
 3 I: Tell me about your schoolwork and other  
 4 people in your life  
 5  
 6 **P9: I am very fond of with my schoolwork, I**  
 7 **take it very seriously. The people who pay for**  
 8 **my schoolwork, I don't want to disappoint**  
 9 **anybody. I get about 80 I think. And the people**  
 10 **in my life are good people, yeah, my family, I**  
 11 **don't have any problems at home.**  
 12  
 13 I: What does people in your life have to do with  
 14 you doing well in school, like in which people in  
 15 your life influences you to do well in school?  
 16  
 17 **P9: My mom, my mom helps me to do well in**  
 18 **school. She didn't, because she dropped out**  
 19 **of school in matric. She had a kid in matric,**  
 20 **she is trying to show me now it is very difficult**  
 21 **to get a job without education or matric. And**  
 22 **my granny, my granny is pushing me very**  
 23 **hard. She wants me to be the first successful**  
 24 **person in my family. And my father, he also**  
 25 **pushes me to do my schoolwork and to stay**  
 26 **out of problems, like bad people.**  
 27  
 28 I: You are saying that your family pushes you to  
 29 do well, can you maybe give me an example of  
 30 what they do  
 31  
 32 **P9: Ok, like my grandma, every day of the year**  
 33 **she does something to help me. Like when I do**  
 34 **good in school like get 80% she buys**  
 35 **something for me. And my mother influences**

Self  
 • fond of schoolwork  
 • take seriously  
 • don't disappoint  
 • good people → family

The importance of  
 family

→ Acknowledge own mistakes  
 → mother → dropped out  
 → v. kind, wees pro-aktief → example why need education

• grandmother → pushing  
 → successful

• father → pushing  
 → work  
 → stay out of trouble

• grandmother → constant encouragement  
 → rewards

36 me because she buys me books, you know I  
 37 really like to read, I love history and to learn  
 38 about what happened in the past. And my  
 39 Father, he tells me about life. He helps me to  
 40 make sense about life, what I am going to find  
 41 when I grow older and the challenges that I am  
 42 going to face.

2  
 • mother → instilled a love for books (rewards)  
 • father → teaches about life  
 → how to make sense of life  
 → challenges to expect (life lessons)

44 I: So am I right if I say that your mother and your  
 45 grandmother motivates you by giving you rewards,  
 46 or something to look forward to, and work towards,  
 47 whereas your father gives you advice about life  
 48 and how to handle life?

49  
 50 **P9: Yes**

51  
 52 I: Is there anybody in your family that can help  
 53 you with your schoolwork when you are going  
 54 through a difficult time?

55  
 56 **P9: Yes a lot, like my Uncle will help me. He**  
 57 **helps me a lot. He used to be one of the bright**  
 58 **ones at school. Like he helped me, but I don't**  
 59 **need much help because I listen in class. He**  
 60 **helps me if I don't get the questions he will**  
 61 **help me.**

Schoolwork help  
 • uncle → education  
 → help with work  
 • Self → listen in class

62  
 63 I: So is there anybody in your family that will  
 64 support you with your schoolwork when you go  
 65 through a difficult time for example something  
 66 happens at school, in your family or in the  
 67 community?

68  
 69 **P9: Yes, my grandmother she is the one that**  
 70 **motivates me a lot, and builds me and tells me**

Grandmother → motivates me  
 → builds me  
 → bad things: concentrate  
 → "schoolwork is thing"  
 I can be successful in

71 when bad things happen in our family or  
 72 school, she is the one who tells me that  
 73 despite everything that is going on around me,  
 74 I have to concentrate on my schoolwork,  
 75 because that is the only thing that I can be  
 76 successful in.

77

78 I: Can you think of an example when you went  
 79 through a difficult time when she supported you  
 80 with your schoolwork?

81

82 **P9: Yes, when my mother and father got**  
 83 **divorced, she told me to stay strong, I should**  
 84 **carry on doing good work, and I should not let**  
 85 **anything distract me. Even if there is a death in**  
 86 **the family, she supports me. She gives me**  
 87 **advice**

88

89 I: What advice did she give you during this time to  
 90 help you to stay focussed on your schoolwork?

91

92 **P9: She said to me like I should not be like**  
 93 **false people or like politicians, she gives me**  
 94 **examples of people like how they used to live**  
 95 **and say he came from a bad background, but**  
 96 **look at how successful he is right now. She**  
 97 **motivates me a lot by pointing out a few**  
 98 **people that I admire, and then she might get**  
 99 **information on how they used to live and so**  
 100 **forth. She tells me I always must work hard,**  
 101 **very hard and be determined, because nothing**  
 102 **beats hard work?**

103

104 I: So do you think that it helps you when she  
 105 gives you examples of how other people reacted

Parents divorced

Grandmother → carry on doing work  
 → don't get distracted  
 → advice

Grandmother → don't be false like  
 politicians  
 → examples: bad background  
 successful now  
 → motivate examples  
 of people I admire - find  
 out background  
 → Determined  
 → "Nothing beats hard  
 work"

Inspiration → succeed through hard work  
 → learn from examples

4

106 when they went through difficult times, or like how  
 107 through hard work they succeeded, does that  
 108 inspire you and helps you to concentrate on your  
 109 work?

110  
 111 **P9: Yes, it inspires me a lot. Those people**  
 112 **they also motivate me, because I read their**  
 113 **books and the books motivate me a lot. Like**  
 114 **my granny, she played a huge role in my me**  
 115 **and my studies.... she is a good character in**  
 116 **my life and it inspired me a lot. There are also**  
 117 **teachers who inspired me a lot because they**  
 118 **are focused.**

Inspiration

- Books of succesful people
- Character of family members
- Teachers who are focussed

119  
 120  
 121 I: What advice would you give family members to  
 122 help other grade 9 learners when they go through  
 123 difficult times

124  
 125 **P9: First of all, I would like them to be true,**  
 126 **true to their children, because nothing beats**  
 127 **the truth. They must be true to them. They**  
 128 **must also sometimes sit with them, talk to**  
 129 **them and give them advice such as pointing**  
 130 **out a few people in their community who has**  
 131 **been successful, and also the ones that did**  
 132 **bad stuff. Compare them, and also show them**  
 133 **the way of life. And also teach them to study,**  
 134 **because it could benefit them a lot when they**  
 135 **study.**

Advice : family

- Be honest/true
- Spend time
- Advice by using examples
- show way of life i. lead by example
- Teach study techniques

136  
 137 I: I would like you to talk to me about your  
 138 community now, so the local area or town that you  
 139 live in. If you had problems that makes it hard for  
 140 you to do your schoolwork. Are there anybody in

141 the neighbourhood or community that will help you  
142 with your schoolwork.

143

144 **P9: In my community there is something**  
145 **called peer pressure, the children get a lot of**  
146 **peer pressure, and they are influenced by their**  
147 **friends of what to do. They also get inspired by**  
148 **things that are bad. Because I live in this area**  
149 **in Tembisa that people call the 'lokasie'. You**

Community

- > peer pressure
- > inspired: bad things
- > area - strong to survive
- > gang related stuff: < drugs fighting
- > strong to survive.
- > listen to adults

150 **have to be strong in order for you succeed**

151 **here. You must not follow bad things, you**  
152 **must just tell yourself that you will not turn out**  
153 **like other people. If you can see the**

Self

- > need to be strong to succeed
- > don't follow bad things
- > tell self - I will not turn out like others
- > % successful vs unsuccessful
- > know who to turn to
- > I listen to adults

154 **percentage of successful and non successful**  
155 **people in my community, there is a whole lot**  
156 **of difference, and when bad things happen in**

157 **my community, I turn to my granny and my**  
158 **uncle, and ask them what to do. And they**  
159 **always say, look, it is very hard now but you**  
160 **have to concentrate on your studies. I follow**

Grandma

- > ask advice when bad community
- > concentrate on studies
- > I respect her for what she does
- > siblings look up to me

161 **their advice and respect them a lot of what**  
162 **they are doing. As I am the oldest they tell my**  
163 **that my siblings are looking up to me, so that**  
164 **pushes me to be more focussed on**

Uncle

- > ask advice when bad community
- > push me to focus on schoolwork
- NOT outside things

165 **schoolwork and less on outside things that are**  
166 **happening in my community. Because my**  
167 **community is very rough, there is this thing**  
168 **called gang related stuff, fighting and drugs,**

Pastor

- > do well and make parents proud
- > helps to focus on schoolwork and be successful.

169 **so in my community you have to be strong to**  
170 **survive. You have to know to listen to adults,**  
171 **any adults that comes to me and talk to me, I**  
172 **listen. In my street there is this pastor who**  
173 **tells me that I should do well and make my**  
174 **parents proud, so after he talks to me I am**  
175 **very focused on my schoolwork, and to be**

Addendum G: Example of Collage

**Self-Support**

I study alone and make notes which helps me alot. Exercising keeps me up so I can't fall asleep while studying.

my friends always help me with anything I need stationery, books and more. It always helps to have them around.

Its safe and great to see my lovely friends.

**FRIENDS**

**School**

my teachers are important in my life and helps me with my classwork. They are friendly and good to have them in my life.

**home**

When I study I need to be on my own my mother is always helping me with everything.

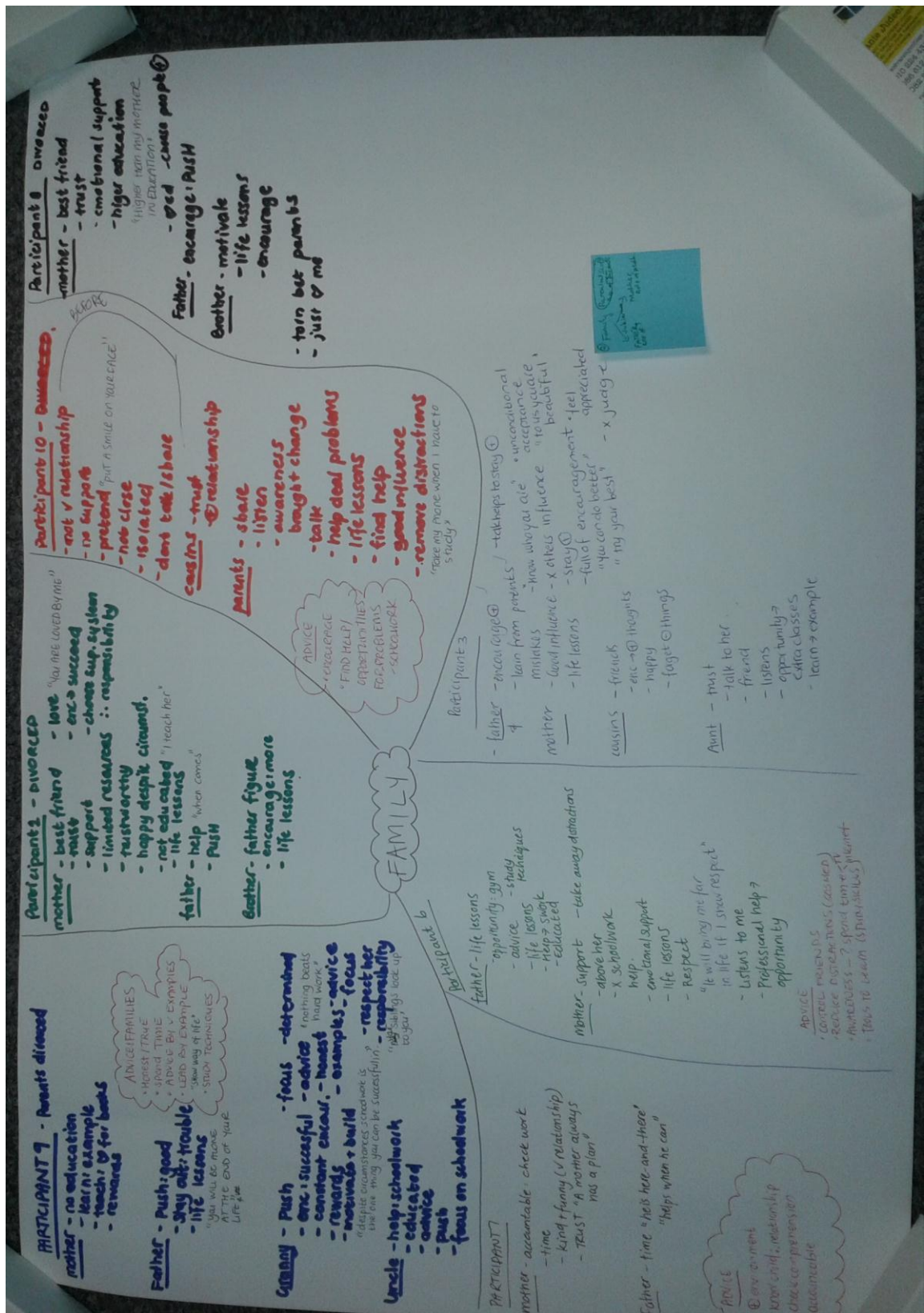
Whenever I am angry, sad or need to study I listen to music to calm me down.

**Community**

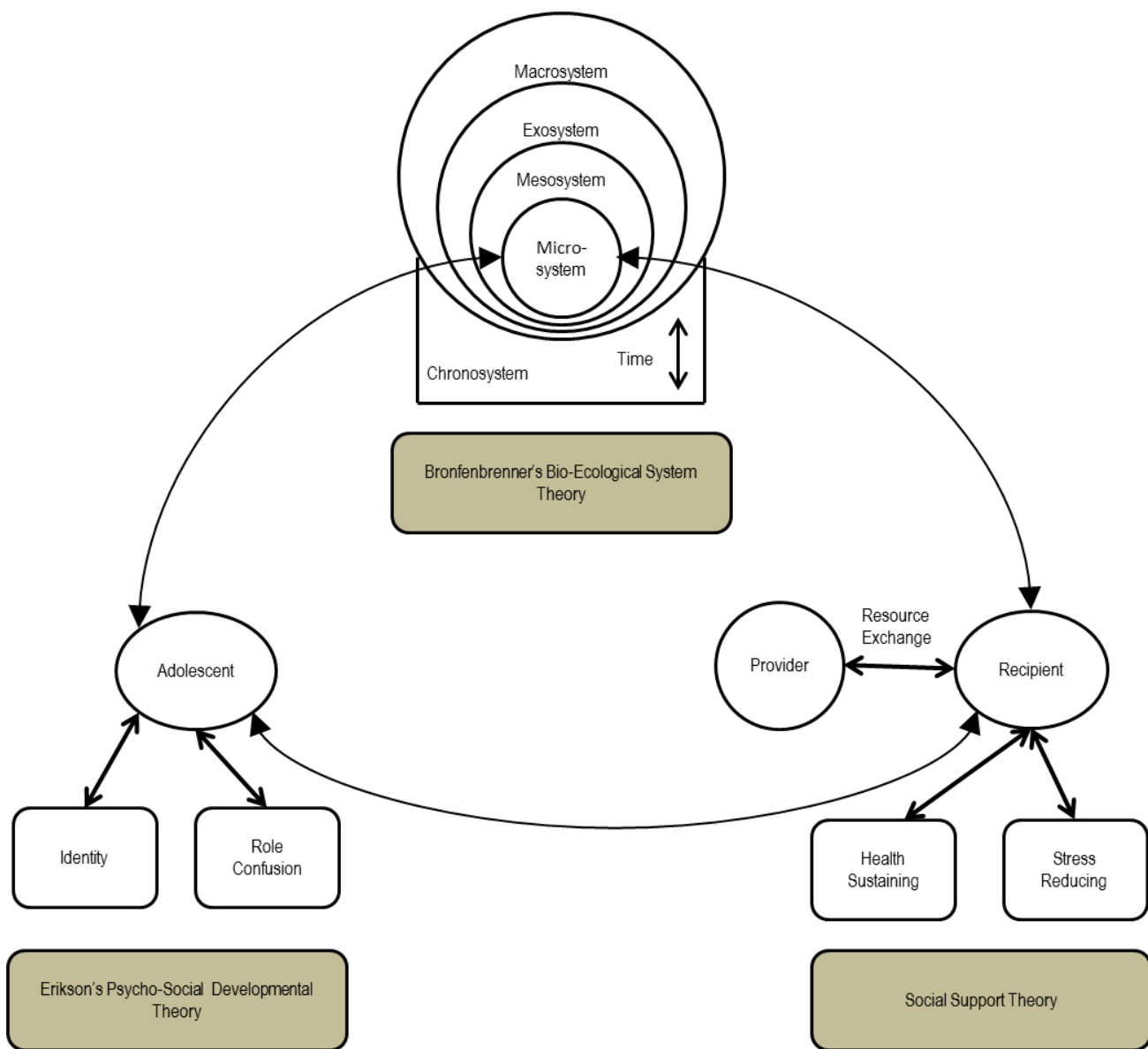
They make a noise but understand where it comes to exams and cycle best. NO crime activities.

**MUSIC**

Addendum H: Example of Thematic Analysis



**Addendum I: Figure 1. Integrated Theoretical Perspectives**



**Addendum J: Figure 2. Adolescent Social Support Themes and Subthemes**

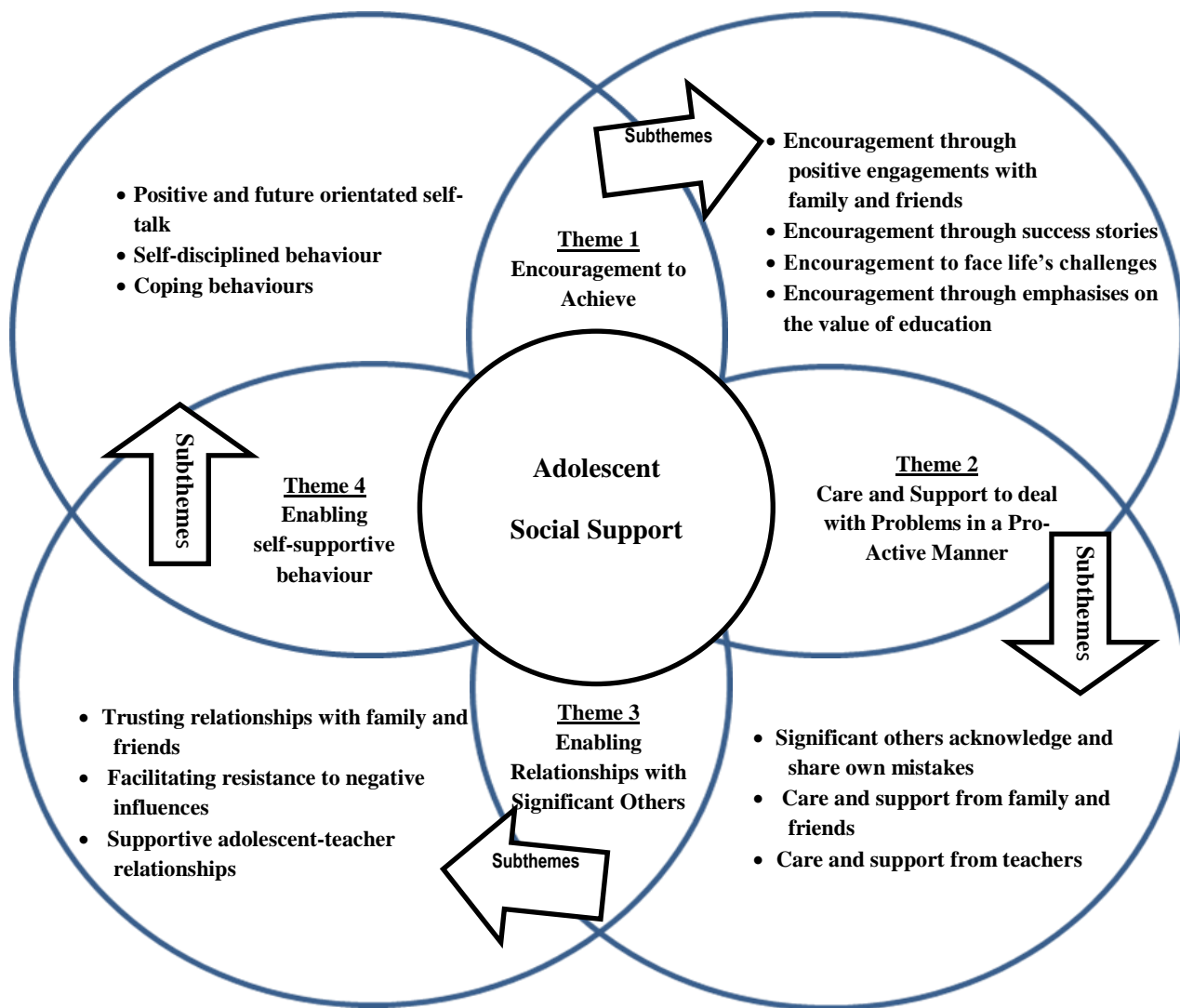


Figure 2. Adolescent Social Support Themes and Subthemes