

# Perceptions regarding the role of social support in academic achievement of adolescents exposed to violence<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*This qualitative study explored how adolescents who have been exposed to violence, perceive the role of social support in their academic achievements. Coupled with a collaging process, individual, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with eight adolescents (two male, six female) in Grade 9, who had the defining characteristics of exposure to violence in their community and an achievement of at least 70% in all school subjects over a period of one year prior to this research study. Drawing on the ideas proposed by Elsaesser, Gorman-Smith and Schoeny (2017) to codify and identify exposure to violence, we specifically included students who knew someone who had been the victim of violence, and/or witnessed a violent incident, and/or was directly victimised (Elsaesser, et al., 2017). The study found that, despite adolescents' exposure to violence, the encouragement to achieve, the provision of care and support to deal with problems in a proactive manner and the formation of enabling relationships with significant others, facilitated academic achievement. Our study concludes that positive social support can buffer the negative effects that exposure to violence has on the academic achievement of adolescent learners. We argue against a one-size-fits-all approach to social support and suggest that the support which comes from the immediate social systems of adolescents (parents, teachers and peers) takes on a more sharpened character in the sense that individual differences, cultural differences and gender differences are seriously taken into account.*

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

## BACKGROUND

Research over the past 20 years reports significantly high rates of exposure to violence among youth living in disadvantaged communities (Copeland, Keeler, Angold & Castello, 2007; Van der Kolk, 2005; Ceballo, Dahl, Aretakis & Ramirez, 2001; Stein, Jaycox, Kataoka, Rhodes & Vestal, 2003). Various researchers have proposed ways to codify and identify violence. For example, Elsaesser, et al. (2017), cite the work of Kennedy and Ceballo (2014: 2) who see violence as including 'knowing someone who has been the victim of violence, witnessing a violent incident, and being directly victimized'. A more nuanced perspective is provided by other writers who associate violence with posttraumatic stress

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disorder, externalising problems, and internalising outcomes (Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura & Baltes, 2009; Margolin & Gordis, 2000 cited in Elsaesser, et al., 2017). Diale (2003) argues that the extent of violence is dependent on circumstances in societies such as warfare, forms of oppression, democracy, freedom, etc. A predominant theme in this body of research is that regardless of the cause of the violence, its effects are damaging at all levels of human life (Diale, 2003; Zinzow, Ruggiero, Resnick, Hanson, Smith, Saunders & Kilpatrick, 2009).

#### *Violence in the South African context*

Violence in South Africa is documented to have reached 'devastating levels' in all forms (Flood & Fergus, 2011 cited in Diale, 2014). Research shows that 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 significantly (National Victims of Crime Survey, 2012; Faul, 2013; Malan, 2013). Research in the SA context strongly 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 & Kaminer, 2000; Ward, Flisher, Zissis, Muller & Lombard, 2001). A study by Seedat et al. (2004) illustrates this trend: they 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 (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Local and international researchers agree that community violence, in particular, critically impacts the well-being of children and adolescents (Muller, Goebel-Fabbri, 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 most prevailing traumas reported in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2012) are those of 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), who examined aspects of the lives of adolescents attending township schools in Cape Town, found high rates of exposure to school, neighbourhood, gang-related and police violence. Their studies found that exposure to community violence in the neighbourhood was the most frequent form of violence exposure, followed by hearing about violence from others. Research in the South African context, supports the argument that, whichever form it might take, violence is one of the most harmful experiences a child or adolescent can encounter (Buckner, Beardslee & Bassuk, 2004; Isaacs, 2010).

#### *The influence of violence on academic achievement*

Over a period of 26 years, research has presented compelling evidence that academic achievement is negatively influenced by the trauma of violence (Henrich et al., 2004). Research across time concurs that the impact of violence on school-aged children results in anxiety, depression, disruptive and aggressive behaviour, substance use and school disengagement which in turn impedes children's academic development from childhood into adolescence and beyond (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998; Jenkins & Bell, 1994; Lorion, Brodsky & Cooley-Quille, 1999; Osofsky, Wewers, Hann & Fick, 1993; Pynoos, Frederick, Nader, Arroyo, Steinberg, Eth & Nunez, 1987; Cooley-Quille, Boyd, Frantz & Walsch, 2001; Pieterse, 2015; Cooney, Renner, Hua, Zhang & Whitney, 2011; Jaffee & Gallop, 2010). The bearing that the trauma of violence has on academic achievement is particularly concerning as high school completion is among the most important tasks of adolescence (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006; Kenkel, Lillard & Mathios, 2006; Sherr, Hensels, Skeen, Tomlinson, Roberts & Macedo, 2016).

While earlier research established broadly that violence exposure is associated with lower cognitive functioning (Pynoos et al., 1987), recent studies report on specific effects of violence exposure on

academic performance. Some studies found violence exposure to be linked to classroom behavioural problems (Dyson, 1990) and decreased school attendance (Bowen & Bowen, 1998). Other recent studies show links between adolescents who have experienced violence and grade repeats (Lipshitz, Rasmusson & Anyan, 2000; Hurt, Malmud, Brodsky & Giannetta, 2001), 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; Baker, Jaffe, Ashbourne & Carter, 2002; Haeseler, 2006; Kennedy, 2007; Martinez-Torteya, Bogat, Eye & Levendosky, 2009; Sherr, Hensels, Skeen, Tomlinson, Roberts & Macedo, 2016). Lipshitz et al. (2000) studied grade repeats among adolescent girls and found that girls with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms were significantly more likely to fail a grade, to be suspended from school or to be arrested than girls without PTSD. Berthold (2000) sums up the key findings in recent research, arguing that the most frequently recurrent characteristics of adolescents living in communities with high incidences of violence, were anxiety, concentration problems and a sense of futurelessness. Berthold (2000) concurs with other writers that these factors play a critical role in academic performance.

While a significant body of research establishes an unmistakable relationship between the spheres of *violence exposure and academic achievement*, these findings are not conclusive. Writers such as Attar, Guerra and Tolan (1994) could not establish that exposure to violence negatively influenced school achievement, nor that violence exposure negatively influences reading achievement. Overstreet and Braun (1999) similarly found that community violence had no adverse effect on academic performance. Rosenthal and Wilson (2003) correspondingly provide evidence that exposure to community violence and psychological symptoms does not influence college performance. Although these findings suggest that the influence of violence on the academic achievement of the adolescent is not irrefutably established, there are many voices which emphasise that it cannot be ignored (Shavers, 2000).

#### *Social support to overcome adversities to achieve academically*

Social support, in various forms, is strongly indicated in the research, since the 1980s, as an effective way to buffer the negative effects of trauma due to violence exposure on academic achievement (Bowen & Bowen, 1998; Coohy et al., 2011; Jaffee & Gallop, 2010; Elsaesser et al., 2017; Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Shumaer and Brownell (1984: 13) 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'.

Particular focus in the literature is given to support which is *perceived*. White (2009) explains that the mere perception or belief of social support holds positive implications for the adolescent, even if the support is not utilised. Garbia-Reid, Reid and Peterson (2005), who investigated perceived social support, parental supervision and classroom participation amongst Latino youths, concur that these factors are salient predictors for positive academic outcomes. Positive perceptions of teacher support are believed not only to keep learners interested in academic work, but also to promote mental wellness which has been linked with increased levels of life satisfaction (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). These, in turn, may lead to better grades and positive peer relationships (Wentzel, 1998). Debates over the *type* of support have also characterised the research in this tradition. While earlier researchers distinguished between the quality and quantity of the social support that contributes to learners' adjustment and well-being (Holahan, Valentiner & Moos, 1995; Nahid & Sarkis, 1994; Ofosky, 1997), recent researchers have looked into the holistic effect of support in providing an enhanced coping and stress-buffering effect (Yasin & Dzulkifi, 2011). The *source* of support has also gained fair attention in the literature. Malundecki and Demaray (2006) argue that both the source (e.g. parent/family, peers/classmates and teachers) as well as social support from each source produces beneficial outcomes for adolescent learners. In accordance, some writers single out the value of support from supportive peer relations and argue that it can serve as a protective mental health function as

it has been linked with a drop in peer victimisation as well as with lower rates of anxiety and depression in adolescent learners (Hodges & Rahe, 1999; Crockett, Iturbide, Torres-Stone, McGinley & Carlo, 2007).

Other writers highlight the value of support from parents. For example, 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 academic performance. Elsaesser et al. (2017), whose study explored the relationship between community violence exposure and academic engagement over the course of mid-adolescence, found the support of family through interventions and mediations highly beneficial in reducing the negative impact of violence on academic performance. 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. Evidently, the adolescent learners' relationships with teachers, role models and supportive community members could be considered as protective factors.

Deficits in social support have also been the focus of much research. This research consistently indicates that a lack of social support can be linked to poor academic and social outcomes for adolescent learners (Demaray & Elliot, 2001). Some writers have found links to poor academic performance through problems such as depression, loneliness and anxiety (Eskin, 2003). 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 is argued to continue well into adulthood (Knopf, Park & Mulye, 2008). A lack of social support is also identified in trauma literature as the key factor that prevents adolescents from recovering from trauma thereby increasing adolescents' risk of developing psychological problems (Phynoos, Steinberg & Wraith, 1995; Rutter, 1990). The above research which shows a significant negative correlation between social support and psychological problems, echoes a strong sentiment in the research: that high social support lowers psychological problems (Yasin & Dzulkifi, 2011).

## AIM OF THE STUDY

The research discussed above suggests a strong interrelatedness between the domains of exposure to *violence during adolescence, academic achievement and social support*. Despite this salient theoretical proposition, few published studies have examined the relationship of these domains in the South African context (Garbia-Reid et al., 2005). Important questions therefore remain. To address the gap in the knowledge, this study aimed to explore the perceptions of adolescents, who were exposed to violence in their communities, regarding the possible role of social support in the facilitation of their academic achievement. The research question addressed in this paper is: *How do adolescents who are exposed to violence, perceive the role of social support in facilitating their academic achievement?*

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1998) provided an approach to answering this question. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) argued that the development of any person is influenced at all levels by five different systems within which they interact: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. An individual is believed to be enmeshed in these different ecosystems, from the intimate space of the home outward to the larger school system and the most expansive system which is society and culture. Each of these systems unavoidably interact with and influence each other in every aspect of the child's life.

Bronfenbrenner's ideas around all the systems are recognised as critical to gaining a holistic understanding of the role of social support in the academic performance of adolescents who have been exposed to violence in South Africa. Research shows that there are many deficiencies which can be examined through the lens of all five nested systems. Changes or conflict in any one layer will inevitably ripple throughout

other layers (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). For example, support is not readily available in South African schools due to limitations regarding human resources in the education support services (Kleintjes, Lund & Flisher, 2010). The above writers establish that whilst policies are in place, the allocation of resources, to implement support programmes are limited. Another tension is that the current economic status of the country is such that 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. While these issues have pertinence, they are outside the scope of the study because they affect the individual in an indirect way relating specifically to the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem.

Our study, which focused on the role of social support in the academic achievement of adolescents exposed to violence, was interested in the individual's most immediate layer of the nested systems: the individual's human relationships, their interpersonal interactions and immediate surroundings. The second level, the mesosystem, was of further interest to our study because it encompasses the different interactions between the characters of the microsystem. For example, connections between home and school, between peer group and family and school teachers or administrators. In order for an interaction to be considered part of the mesosystem, it has to be a direct interaction between two aspects of the microsystem that influences the development of the individual (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The bio-ecological model offered by Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) offered a framework to examine the contexts, or nested structures on those levels most immediate to the lives of adolescents exposed to violence. To guide this study, we therefore adopted aspects of the model relating only to the level of the microsystem and the level of the mesosystem. The following two sub-questions were drawn from Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (1998) concept of the microsystem and the mesosystem respectively:

- a) How do participants perceive the role of social support in their interpersonal interactions?
- b) How do participants perceive the role of social support in their immediate surroundings?

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

The task of understanding the adolescent learners' innermost, subjective meanings and experiences – seemed achievable only through the use of a qualitative research approach (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). A qualitative collective, with in-site case study design (Yin, 2009) was employed to present a multi-perspectival analysis of the multiple voices and perspectives of all the relevant groups of participants as well as the interactions between them (Feagin, Orum & Sjoberg, 1991). This methodological choice allowed us to preserve the integrity of our narrative data, by employing words, observations, and interpretations, to provide a detailed and rich in-depth discussion of the phenomenon in question (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

### *Sample and Setting*

We chose a secondary school in Gauteng (South Africa) as the site of the study on account of the extreme levels to which the adolescent learners are exposed to violence in their communities (South African Police Service, 2012). We focused on grade 9 learners in cognisance of research in the South African context which indicates that adolescents in particular suffer as a consequence of the violence on a daily basis (Ward et al., 2001).

Purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) was used to draw the sample, because we had a clear purpose and a distinctive set of characteristics of students who would fit in with our goals. The process of purposive sampling involved the task of narrowing our focus to participants who had a close match to a specific set

of defining elements. We specifically looked for students who showed a combined match to specific scores on a baseline survey on exposure to violence in the community and an academic achievement score of at least 70% in each of their school subjects over a period of one year prior to this research study.

We adapted a Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (Ward et al., 2004) to include specific items such as witnessing a violent incident, knowing someone who had been a victim of violence and being a victim of violence personally. Further questions about types of violence such as stabbings, beatings and shootings, which are most likely to occur in South Africa, were included (Ward et al., 2001). The adapted questionnaire was administered to all grade 9 learners in the school. This was conducted with much discretion during Life-Orientation lessons, given that the focus was on a highly sensitive issue. We narrowed this baseline group down further by analysing learners' school reports to get a match of at least 70% in each of their school subjects over a period of one year prior to this research study. The final sample, which was drawn from the baseline survey, consisted of eight adolescents (two male, six female) from Grade 9. These learners were selected as a bounded case, within this specific site, based on the closeness of their match to our defining characteristics of academic achievement and exposure to community violence.

#### *Data Collection*

Two complementary sources of data were employed to obtain an optimal understanding of the participants' perceptions on the role of social support in their academic achievement, despite their exposure to violence (Yin, 2009). The one source, which is more traditional, involved the use of individual, semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Apart from their effectiveness in providing a deeper understanding of the social phenomena in question, face-to-face interviews were particularly suitable to explore the sensitive topic of violence in participants' lives – a topic adolescents may not have felt comfortable talking about in a group environment (Silverman, 2000).

As a complementary data source, collaging was adopted to 'flesh out different facets' and to get a 'nuanced understanding' of how adolescents who are exposed to violence, perceive the role of social support in facilitating their academic achievement (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010: 4). Collage has recently gained stature in qualitative research because of its potential to fragment space and repurpose objects to contextualise multiple realities (Gerstenblatt, 2013). As described by Davis (2008: 250), cited in Gerstenblatt (2013), 'Collage, created from a synthesis of shattered fragments, realized in an emergent, often randomized composition, arrives at meaning in a very different way—accidentally, capriciously, provocatively, tangentially'. In the light of these compelling arguments, collaging was seen as an optimum platform for participants to voice their stories particularly because sensitive issues (such as community violence) and vulnerable populations (adolescents) were involved (Wiles, Pain & Crow, 2010). Collaging served as a complementary technique to 'support and enliven the analysis of otherwise dry and detached interview data, thus producing new knowledge and interpretation' (Gerstenblatt, 2013: 12).

The collaging process involved various steps. Participants were first supplied with old magazines with found images. They were then required to glue together fragments taken from the found images to visually portray a response to the phenomena in question. We narrowed down the questions we used in the interviews, to facilitate an interpretation that participants could visually convey in three separate collages. We then examined each participant's set of three collages collectively using aspects such as 'content, color, shape, size, content, space, directionality' as a basis (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010). Our aim was to find possible commonalities across the collages. When identified, we used the common aspects to push the analysis further and provide a deeper interpretation of how adolescents who are exposed to violence, perceive the role of social support in facilitating their academic achievement.

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analysed using the six-stage model described by Braun and Clarke (2006), because it worked to reflect participants' realities, as well as to 'unpick or unravel the surface of actual reality' (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 81). The individual interviews, which were audiotaped, were transcribed and then thematically coded. Themes and subthemes were subsequently identified and clustered accordingly. Comparisons were made across the themes to identify connections between the themes, after which the themes were named and defined. The final analysis involved the task of the researchers telling the complicated story of the data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### *Ethical Considerations*

Participants were given detailed and clear information on the purpose of the study prior to data collection. A process of obtaining consent from the principal and the parents preceded this, and the learners were required to give written assent themselves. We were cognisant of ensuring trustworthiness when undertaking a qualitative inquiry (Shenton, 2004). To obtain higher levels credibility, the following measures were incorporated: a) thorough member checking and self-reflection were conducted (Creswell, 2007); b) thick descriptions of the research process and findings are provided by presenting direct quotations from the transcribed data; c) extensive descriptions of the research context, procedures and methodology are presented to enhance dependability. Lastly, crystallisation (Ellingson, 2009) was used instead of triangulation to ensure confirmability. Using the strategy of crystallisation we suspended our examination of the data for a temporary period so that we could reflect on our analysis and discover patterns or themes we had noticed during our immersion process (Niewenhuis, 2007). Crystallisation as a step in qualitative research urged us to attend to 'voices that differ from your own' in order to gain insight into 'multiple constructed realities' (Hodder, cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 144).

## DISCUSSION

The study found that support from the participants' most immediate layer of the nested system, the components of supportive significant others (parents), supportive teachers and supportive peers (representing both process and contextual factors), contributed significantly to adolescents' academic achievement, despite prolonged exposure to violence.

### *Supportive significant others*

One of the strongest forms of social support that emerged in the study was the *encouragement to achieve*. The idea of being encouraged by significant others to stay positive and focus on academic achievement despite their challenges, was strongly reflected in participants' responses in both the interviews and the collages. For example, the participant, who is quoted below, specifically emphasised the encouraging manner in which his family members responded to his 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.

Many of the collages depicted a similar sentiment: reflecting images of family members who played a key role in participants' academic achievement.

There was a common perception amongst participants that the support of family members played a major role in encouraging them to deal with problems related to their academic performance. This point is illustrated in the references the following participants made to their 'studies', 'schooling' and 'solving a problem':

After my uncle died and 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 realize in the big world it does not work like that...and my studies are everything (P6).

It sometimes breaks me when people say negative things about me, but my mother always tells me..... she tells me to forget about them, know that you are loved by me.....there are some who will motivate you and who want to see you succeed in your schooling (P1).

My dad paid for me to go to the gym.....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 (P7).

Another participant stated the following in an interview:

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. I understand her situation now, and I feel so bad (P4).

These narratives suggest that, against the background of violence, strong parent-adolescent relationships can provide a safe, stable and structured environment which promotes academic achievement. This finding is consistent with the literature. Several other studies similarly found that parental practices such as encouraging adolescents to master objectives, promotes the development of competencies within the adolescent, which, in turn, supports academic success (Boon, 2007; Marjoribanks, 2005; Gonzalez, Doan Holbein & Quilter, 2002; Turner & Johnson, 2003). This finding adds weight to Covington's (2000) theory that motivational factors (e.g. academic objectives and future goals) are predictors of academic performance in adolescence.

It was apparent that social support was linked to academic achievement through relationships with family members based on trust. The following responses are suggestive of the links participants established between trusting family relationships and academic success:

My father helps me to make sense of 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 if I don't focus on my schoolwork and do well (P4).

My mother supports me emotionally because she tells me about life, how to talk to people, how to respect any person, how to study and become someone (P6).

It was apparent that the unconditional trust and acceptance participants received from their families assisted them to resist peer pressure and negative influences.

Participants particularly emphasised the value of trusting parental relationships as valuable support systems. This finding showed concurrence with studies conducted in the 1990s. 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 trust and support. Lau and Pun's findings (1999) showed 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. Mirroring these findings, this study argues that trusting relationships with significant others are enabling in terms of the academic achievement of adolescents who have been exposed to violence in their communities.



*Supportive teachers*

The study found strong evidence of encouragement to achieve academically through the optimism of certain teachers. Most respondent's collages and interview responses showed that they valued their teachers' positivity about their academic prospects. One respondent re-called his teachers voice saying,

I know you will do well... have faith in yourself... you can make the future better for yourself.

Some respondents indicated that they 'pushed' themselves further because their teachers challenged them to chase their goals and dreams. As a respondent commented,

...my teacher always made me feel that I could do it.

Participants commonly perceived that a good adolescent-teacher relationship facilitated academic achievement, especially during difficult times. When asked for advice on how relationships with significant people could support adolescent learners to develop a strong sense of self, participants stressed the value of good adolescent-teacher relationships. Some of the ideas articulated were: 'teachers should try to listen', 'understand what is going wrong at home' and 'try to help like when the mother is not there...'. Participants also identified teachers as significant others that encouraged them to actively deal with their problems. When asked about advice on how significant people in their lives could facilitate spaces to assist them to deal with problems in a pro-active manner, participants indicated that teachers especially could show an interest in adolescents by being aware of their individual needs.

The strong message conveyed was that teachers' encouragement in the form of guidance and motivation helped shape and sustain learners' academic performance. Numerous research studies have similarly found a strong relationship between positive statements made by significant others (such as teachers) and positive self-perceptions (Blake & Slate, 1993; Campbell, 1989; Elgin, 1980; Goodman & Ritini, 1991; Joubert, 1991; Burnett, 1999; Rivikin, Hanusheck & Kain, 2005). This study echoes the sentiments in the literature that teachers play an important supportive role in the academic development of adolescents from violent backgrounds.

*Supportive peers*

The study found compelling evidence that participants thrived from supportive and encouraging engagements with their friends and this translated into academic success. As one respondent stated

Without my friends, I wouldn't be able to do well... If I'm stuck...my friends always help me.

Another responded commented that

I get down with things that happen in my life...and then I don't want to study...but my friends always tell me to ...get back in the game...because I have the mind...

Participants generally indicated that they sought trusting and reliable relationships with their peers. The following response bears testimony to this:

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.

Care from friends was clearly seen as invaluable to the participants. This care ranged from immediate issues such as keeping one another updated on schoolwork and providing assistance when they fell behind to long-term aspects such as staying focused on the future.

### Reflection

Although none of the findings suggest easy solutions to the dilemmas that face adolescents in their academic development, they do help to articulate the association social support has with sustainable academic achievement. Much evidence was presented in the study to suggest that those adolescents who successfully mastered certain challenges gained valuable skills to assist them in continuing to achieve academically. This is consistent with arguments in the literature. For example, Scales and Leffert (2004) argue that the internal assets for development, as identified 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 literature additionally reflects a rich argument in support of the role that student motivation and engagement play in learning and academic achievement (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006; Scales & Leffert, 2004). The findings in this study support the above argument that, despite their exposure to violence, social support plays a significant role in facilitating adolescents' academic achievements.

The two components adopted from Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (1998) Bio-ecological model and the dynamic, interactive relationships among them, had significance for this study. We found that the components of personal characteristics, supportive teachers, supportive peers and family members (representing both process and contextual factors) significantly contributed to adolescents' academic achievement, despite prolonged exposure to violence. Our study also indicated that supportive microsystems (such as proximal relationships with significant others) could serve as a protective factor, especially if this system supports the adolescent's feelings of belonging, love and encouragement. The proximal processes of the adolescents in this study contributed to actualising the academic potential of adolescent learners. However, 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 self-discipline and coping behaviours) as well as the nested set of structures or context. In the light of these ideas, this study supports the ideas of writers such as Morrison, Robertson, Laurie and Kelly (2002) and Calvete and Connor-Smith (2006) who argue for a combination of all these sources and promote the idea of *support networks*, as invaluable in the achievement of positive academic engagement.

### CONCLUSION

Our study provides strong evidence of the constructive effect of social support, which can be explicitly linked to a host of positive outcomes in an adolescent's academic development. Our study therefore concludes that positive social support can buffer the negative effects that exposure to violence has on the academic achievement of adolescent learners. Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (1998) Bio-ecological model provides researchers and practitioners with a conceptual model that can help them to understand how to enhance social support so as to positively build the academic aspects of the lives of adolescents from violent backgrounds. The continuous dynamic interaction and interplay between the multiple influences on the adolescent's life implies that when an adolescent experiences difficulties, the entire system needs to be seen as a whole, synergised system and not a single cause.

While the evidence is strong that social support serves a buffering role for the academic development of adolescents from violent backgrounds, this paper suggests that different types of social support interrelate with social contexts differently. It suggests that all social support is not equal; and similarly it suggests that deliberate strategies that build social support as part of adolescent development programmes need to be cognisant that social support enhancement may work differently for different individuals, different groups and different settings. In addition, there is more work to be done to examine how social support across the different contexts of adolescents' lives is operationalised in different cultural settings. We acknowledge that our study is limited by its single setting context, and might not necessarily represent the majority of

school contexts in Southern Africa. We recommend that future research focus on larger and more diverse samples.

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