

VOLUME ONE

**ADOLESCENT GIRLS' UNDERSTANDINGS AND EXPERIENCES OF
SOCIAL SUPPORT WITHIN THEIR FRIENDSHIP GROUP**

by

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ADOLESCENT GIRLS' UNDERSTANDINGS AND EXPERIENCES OF
SOCIAL SUPPORT WITHIN THEIR FRIENDSHIP GROUP

Abstract

In the context of growing concerns about the mental health of children and adolescents in the United Kingdom, it is recognised that social support offered by parents, peers and teachers plays an important role in the emotional and psychological well-being of young people.

This thesis (Volume One) was produced as part of the written requirements for the Doctoral training in Educational Psychology. It contains four chapters. Chapter One provides an overview of the volume of work and foregrounds my identity and epistemological position. Chapter Two provides a critical review of the theoretical and research literature on social support for children and young people. Chapter Three reports on findings from a small-scale study carried out with adolescent girls within a friendship group at a secondary school. The research employed qualitative methods to explore participants' lived experience of social support, and data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Chapter Four comprises final reflections on IPA as a methodology and the contribution of the study to my practice as an educational psychologist (EP).

To my wonderful husband Jon

for your belief in me,
your patience and understanding, and
for never complaining about the third presence in our marriage!

To my mum Judy

for being the voice of calm and encouragement
on the end of the phone.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME ONE

1. Structure and content of Volume One

This volume of work constitutes the first part of a two volume thesis, forming the written requirements for the Doctorate in Applied Educational and Child Psychology at the University of Birmingham. Volume One consists of a small scale research study and linked literature review.

Chapter 1: Introduction to Volume One considers my dual roles as a trainee educational psychologist (TEP) employed by a local authority and as a researcher fulfilling the requirements of the Doctorate in Applied Educational and Child Psychology at the University of Birmingham. It foregrounds my epistemological position and orientation to a community psychology perspective. It also considers the intended audience for this volume of work, including implications of writing for a specified journal, namely the *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*.

Chapter 2: Social Support for Children and Young People: Context, Current Literature and Directions for Future Research provides a critical review of the literature pertinent to the research study. It includes discussion of the ways in which social support has been conceptualised in the theoretical literature and approaches to social support research. In keeping with the focus of the *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, the literature review uses the lens of community psychology through which to highlight inconsistencies and limitations within the

existing body of knowledge on social support and to advocate a qualitative and contextualised approach to studying social support.

Chapter 3: Adolescent Girls' Understandings and Experiences of Social Support within their Friendship Group describes a small-scale qualitative research study which was designed to address gaps in the existing social support literature. It presents the rationale for the study, the research questions and the chosen methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The procedure for analysing data from semi-structured interviews is described and findings are initially presented in terms of emerging themes and then discussed in relation to each research question. This chapter also considers implications of the study for practitioners working with children and young people and outlines limitations and directions for future research.

While the *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* does not typically include such a detailed Discussion section or the range of Appendices included here, this reflects the need to fulfil University requirements and meet the assessment criteria for 'Level D'.

Chapter 4: Concluding Reflections comprises final thoughts about the research study which could not be accommodated in Chapter Three. It presents additional reflections on IPA as a methodology, and reflections on the contribution of the study to my practice as an EP.

2. My identity and position as a researcher

My identity as a female, with my own experiences of friendship as an adolescent girl, and my identity as a TEP working with young people, likely influenced my choice of research, the conduct of the inquiry and the interpretations of the data in both conscious and unconscious ways. In particular, the research reflects some of my values as a psychologist relating to the importance of highlighting strengths and resources rather than focusing on deficits and problems, my desire to 'give voice' to young people and my attempts to make participation in the research a positive and empowering experience for those adolescents involved.

In acknowledging that research will always be influenced by the values, interpretations and assumptions of the researcher, I align myself with the ontological and epistemological assumptions of an interpretive (or constructivist) paradigm, which also recognises the existence of multiple realities that are based on people's experiences in context (e.g. Henwood, 1997). This approach to research is described as a phenomenological, holistic and humanistic paradigm, which focuses on language, subjective human experience and the meaning that people make of their experiences in their historical, social, cultural and political contexts (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). My critique of the predominant deductive and quantitative approach to studying social support, the questions I have been orientated to ask and my choice of research methods and analysis reflect the anti-positivist position that numbers do not provide a better, a more accurate or a more correct translation of social life than do words or text (Tuffin, 2004). Rather, through the use of qualitative methods, the question of understanding is given greater emphasis than the role of measurement.

The literature review and research paper adopt an orientation to the principles and practices of community psychology (CP), reflecting my own growing interest in the discipline which was borne of my tutor's role in lecturing on CP and his involvement in a CP interest group.

Although difficult to define, Rappaport (2005) offers the following explanation of the distinctiveness of community psychology:

'While we do science, it is not our unique contribution. Our contribution is a self conscious social and professional analysis and critique that is both added to and changes conventional science' (p.236).

Situating this volume of work within a community psychology perspective has afforded me a conceptual lens through which critically to appraise the social support literature, as well as a clear focus for designing a research study that is concerned with seeing people within the context of their own natural settings and social systems (Orford, 1992; 2008), in order to contribute a different perspective to the growing body of knowledge on social support.

3. Intended audience for Volume One

In line with University guidance that Chapter Two (literature review) and Chapter Three (research study) of Volume One should be written to journal specification for a publication of the student's choice, my nominated journal reflects the community psychology orientation of the literature review and research paper. The *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* is a UK-based peer reviewed journal which publishes papers regarding social behaviour in the context of community. The journal is international in scope, reflecting the common concerns of scholars and community practitioners in Europe and worldwide. It is chosen because it is

accessible to various professionals who identify as community practitioners and researchers.

The *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* operates an online submission and peer review system (see Appendix 1 for instructions to authors). While the target journal influenced the focus of Chapters Two and Three, there was a slight tension between conforming to journal specification and being mindful of University assessed criteria. This is most evident in the detail and depth of the various sections of the research paper, the word count and document presentation. This thesis adopts the Harvard system of referencing which is standard for the presentation of academic text at the University of Birmingham, rather than the American Psychological Association (APA) system which is used by the *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*.

In keeping with University requirements, the findings of the literature review and research study have been presented in different formats for different audiences. Participants received verbal feedback about the key research findings and a written research summary (see Appendix 2). An overview of the social support literature and a summary of the research findings will be presented to educational psychologists in the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) in which I work and to members of a multi-professional Critical and Community Psychology Interest group (CCPIG) based in the West Midlands (see Appendix 3).

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Appendix 1

[not available in the digital version of this thesis]

Appendix 2

Public domain briefing 1: research summary for participants

Adolescent girls' understandings and experiences of social support within their friendship group

Catherine Lander

University of Birmingham, June 2010

Introduction

Social support offered by parents, peers and teachers plays an important role in the emotional well-being of children and young people. Adolescents may have a special need for social support to help them navigate the many changes and transitions during this period of development.

Although there is a large body of quantitative research on social support (i.e. using fixed-choice surveys and statistical analysis), few studies focus on obtaining detailed and rich information about social support by giving voice to adolescents.

Method

Participants were five adolescent girls, aged 14 years, who were part of the same friendship group in a community comprehensive school for girls.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the main method of gathering information about experiences (e.g. 'What are your best experiences of being in your friendship group?'), understandings (e.g. 'What do you get from knowing each other?'), and contextual information (e.g. 'When do you have contact with your friends in a typical school day?'). Participant observation took place in the participants' form room, a site that had been identified in the interviews as significant to their experiences of social support during the school day.

Interview transcripts were analysed according to the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This involved a process of making initial notes on each transcript, developing themes, searching for connections across themes, and then comparing themes across participant accounts to find similarities and differences.

Findings

Theme	Subthemes
Being there	Fulfilling the need to talk
	Engaging in social activity
	Offering practical support
Group belonging	Sharing interests
	Social identity
	Social acceptance / validation
Influence of context	School environment
	Community environment

Being there

'Being there' seemed to capture the meaning of social support for participants. It is interpreted as the need for the constant presence of similar others with whom to share the school experience, and is contrasted with 'being alone'.

"Like somebody that's always there for you and somebody that's kind of like you".

Group belonging

'Group belonging' represents participants' sense of being connected to others in the friendship group, and shows how their social support experiences are influenced by group processes.

"In our form I definitely think we're the strongest group cos you get other groups and they'll always be arguing and saying stuff to each other, so you're not really in the group then if you can do that. I think that cos we all like doing the same things, we're all like basically the same, it helps us to get on".

Influence of context

The school environment influenced participants' experiences of social support through the use of ability grouping, seating plans, rules about socialising at break and lunch times, and the physical environment.

"We're usually in our form a lot. We don't really mingle a lot. We don't go to other forms".

Opportunities for social support experiences out of school were limited due to the distance between participants' homes. However, they create an alternative 'virtual context' for social support through the use of email and social networking sites.

Discussion

Limitations

Firstly, the interpretation is affected by participants' ability to articulate their experiences of social support and their willingness to share information in an honest and open way. Secondly, the period of participation was brief and therefore limited. Thirdly, the small sample size is not representative of all adolescent girls and therefore wider generalisations should be made with caution.

Implications for practice

It is unlikely that the social support provisions highlighted by participants could be supplied by adults or assigned peer mentors. Practitioners should focus on facilitating naturally occurring supportive relationships between peers. Efforts to promote peer relationships are needed at the start of Year 7 or during transition from primary school, before friendship groups become established. Teachers could also provide support for group interactions in the classroom through using co-operative small group work.

Future directions

This study adds to a growing number of detailed, small-scale, qualitative studies which further our understanding of the way in which social support functions for adolescents. Results need to be examined in other adolescent populations (e.g. within all-male and gender-mixed friendship groups). Future research could also investigate differences between social support from friendships groups and dyadic relationships (i.e. pairs of friends), as well as explore changes in the way that social support is defined and experienced by young people over time.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Year 9 pupils who participated in this study and Ms Harris for helping to ensure that the research process ran smoothly.

Appendix 3

**Public domain briefing 2: presentation to Educational Psychology Service and
Critical and Community Psychology Interest Group**



Adolescent girls' understandings
and experiences of social support
within their friendship group

A literature review and research study
forming part of the Doctorate in Applied
Educational and Child Psychology

Catherine Lander



Why study social support?

- Plays an important protective role against mental health problems
 - The relationship b/w availability of social support and mental health, which is well established for adults, also exists for young people (Green et al., 2005)
- CYP have 'special needs' for social support
 - In particular, adolescence is characterised by transitions, challenges and physical and psychological changes.
- Central concept in community psychology
 - CP aims to consider people within the context of the social settings and systems of which they are a part (Orford, 1992)

Social support offered by parents, peers and teachers plays an important role in the emotional and psychological well-being of CYP.

Green et al. (2005) 2004 survey of prevalence of mental disorders amongst CYP in GB: found relationship b/w availability of social support and mental health. National CAMHS Review (DH, 2008): asked CYP to describe what 'made them feel good inside'. One of three factors consistently mentioned was 'having good support networks - across family, friends and school'.

Adolescents have a special need for social support to help them navigate through the many changes and transitions that characterise this period of development.

CP: literature review and research paper adopt an orientation to the principles and practices of CP. Concept of social support s given centrality within CP as a key resource to human development and well-being which lies at the interface between the individual and the social systems of which s/he is a part.

EP: lots of interventions are used in schools to promote social support, e.g. circle of friends, buddy systems. But do we know what CYP actually find useful? What does social support mean to them? What kinds of social supports experiences do they value? – Voice of Child.



Literature review – conceptualising social support

- Social support is a complex phenomenon that is hard to clarify
- Definitions abound but none have been accepted as definitive
- Definitions lacking in detail and sensitivity to context hold little utility for practitioners
- Social support tends to be viewed as a within-person construct rather than as a characteristic of groups or settings

Complicating our understanding of social support experiences in adolescence is that social support is a complex phenomenon that is hard to clarify.

Definitions are criticised for their generalised or global nature.

They hold little utility amongst policy makers and practitioners in a position to identify and meet the support needs of CYP (Williams et al., 2004)

Orford (1992, 2008): critical of the tendency to treat social support as a within-person construct . Points to importance of recognising that it can be a characteristic of groups or settings and not of individuals at all. Felton & Berry (1992) also argue that by focusing on individual-to-individual ties, definitions of social support ignore the important role of groups and the kinds of social support functions best offered by them.

Literature review – conceptualising social support

Source	Definition of social support
Weiss (1974)	6 categories of social provisions: attachment; social integration; opportunity for nurturance; reassurance of worth; sense of reliable alliance; obtaining of guidance
Cobb (1976)	Information from others that one is loved & cared for, valued & esteemed, and part of a social network
House (1981)	4 types of social support: emotional; instrumental; informational; appraisal
Tardy (1985)	5 dimensions of social support: direction; disposition; description; content; network
Vaux (1988)	3 components: support network resources; supportive behaviours; subjective appraisals of support



Literature review – social support research

- Predominance of quantitative, deductive studies examining two theoretical models:
 - Main-effect model: social support is directly helpful in all circumstances
 - Stress-buffering model: social support is particularly effective as a buffer during times of stress
- Findings are at best inconsistent and at worst conflicting

Main-effect model: well-supported by research with adolescent populations. Social support from parents, teachers and peers has been found to promote a range of positive outcomes in CYP, as well as reduce negative outcomes.

Stress-buffering model: fewer studies have investigated this hypothesis among CYP and those that have report inconsistent findings.

These studies demonstrate that social support is associated with a wide range of positive outcomes for CYP. They also provide evidence for the two different ways in which individuals come to benefit from social support.

But: findings are at best inconsistent and at worst conflicting

Why? Methodological problems: instruments used have evolved from different concepts of social support and thus produce different results. Measuring social support in an objective and universal way (using predetermined Qs /standardised measures) fails to capture the diversity of CYP's social support experiences and obscures local, contextual meanings.



Literature review – social support research

- Studies that adopt an inductive approach to research are relatively sparse
- Such studies provide rich data and capture the complexity of social support for CYP
- Details derived from qualitative research can aid understanding and utility of definitions of social support (Williams et al., 2004)
- Emphasis is placed on the 'voice' of CYP

Inductive research: theory emerges from the data ensuring that our understanding of social support is grounded in views and experiences of CYP. Research process is more open-ended, exploratory, adventurous and discovery-oriented.

Use of qualitative methods in research: case studies, interviews, focus groups, participant observation, field notes.

Generally informed by an interpretive paradigm which aims to understand the subjective world of human experience.

Stewart (2000): extent that problems and solutions are context-dependent and meaning-laden, descriptions of them need to be as detailed and contextualised as possible if we are to expect them to be useful to others.

All place importance on hearing the perspectives of adolescents, and ensuring that they are given the opportunity to define their own reality.

Literature review – social support research

Woodgate (2006)	adolescents' cancer experiences in Canada	substantive theory: <i>keeping the spirit alive</i> <i>being there</i> : key element of social support
Halpenny et al. (2008)	Children's narratives about support following parental separation in Ireland	developmental patterns in narratives: young children - opportunities for distraction adolescents - opportunities for communicating their feelings
Logsdon et al. (2005)	pregnant adolescents' experiences of social support in USA	<i>patchwork quilt</i> : piecing together support from adults, peers and partners context issues: violence, family composition, financial hardship

Woodgate (2006): interviews, participant observation & focus groups.

15 adolescents, paediatric cancer unit in western Canada.

Detailed context-specific definition of social support (formed part of substantive theory - *keeping the spirit alive*).

'*Being there*': seen as key element of supportive relationship. Important phenomenon, had received minimal attention in paediatric oncology literature.

Involved x6 behaviours: being there to comfort me; being there to hold my hand; being there to keep me from feeling lonely; being there to help me feel like I have a life; being there to keep me positive; and being there for me despite everything.

Halpenny et al. (2008) SSIs with 60 children (8-11 yrs & 13-17 yrs) to elicit perspectives on informal support (e.g. family, friends) and formal support (e.g. counselling services) in helping them cope with changes in family contexts.

Logsdon et al. (2005): feminist study; focus groups with 30 participants attending public school for pregnant/parenting adolescents in USA.

Rich picture of how social support is experienced in the context of their complex lives as they try to meet the developmental needs of pregnancy and adolescence whilst also facing multiple challenges.



Research Study

- Take a qualitative, contextualised approach to studying social support
- Use qualitative methods to explore the meaning of social support for CYP
- Opportunity for CYP to tell their own stories, in their own words ('give voice')
- Avoid treating social support solely as an individual variable (e.g. Orford, 2008)

Although the research literature on social support in childhood & adolescence is extensive, there is a paucity of studies which focus on obtaining detailed and rich information about social support.

We lack a deeper vision of how CYP experience social support.

Little attention has been paid to social support resources residing in groups, communities or settings, reflecting the general tendency in the literature to individualise social support.

Current study: to explore, using a phenomenological methodology, adolescent girls' perceptions and lived experiences of social support within the context of their friendship group.



Research Questions

- How do adolescent girls understand and experience social support within their friendship group?
- In what contexts do experiences of social support take place during the school day?
- In what contexts do experiences of social support take place outside the school day?



Methodology: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

- Qualitative methodology concerned with how people make sense of their own experiences
- Asks Qs about *what things are like*, and *how people understand them*.
- Importance of reflexivity
- IPA benefits from:
 - Small sample size
 - Personal accounts (e.g. interview or diary data)
 - Articulate participants
 - Additional contextual data

IPA: Smith (1996); Smith et al. (2009)

Relatively new qualitative methodology developed specifically within psychology. Derived from phenomenology: both a philosophy and a research method. Phenomenologists believe that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday world and the aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible social and psychological phenomena, refraining from any pre-given theory, deduction or assumption.

IPA explicitly acknowledges that direct access to the personal meaning offered by participants is not possible. The 'double hermeneutic' recognises that researchers interpret through their own conceptual and perceptual lens the interpretations made by those being studied. IPA researchers are encouraged to reflect upon the values, experiences, interests, preconceptions and assumptions they bring to the research process in recognition of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter.

Additional contextual data – can be helpful for understanding particular local contexts and activities (Smith et al., 2009)



Sampling

- Purposive: identify and recruits participants who will give me a meaningful perspective on the phenomena of interest
- Homogenous: participants are chosen because they offer insights from a position of shared expertise

=

5 adolescent girls in the same friendship group at the same secondary school

IPA: typically involves small, homogenous samples, purposively selected because they share the experience of a particular situation, event or condition

Participants were 5 adolescent girls (aged 14 yrs) who were part of the same friendship group in a community comprehensive school for girls.

Over two-thirds of pupils are from minority ethnic groups and just under one third are eligible for free school meals. 2 participants = Black Caribbean; 2 = White British; 1 = Asian. The school is in an urban location and attracts pupils from a wide area.

Rationale for choosing participants within the same friendship group :

1. offered a way of viewing social support as a characteristic not of individuals but rather of groups, communities or settings.

2. enabled access to a richer, shared understanding of social support through combining multiple perspectives of the phenomena.

Year 9 form group was identified; pupils completed sociometric assessment; 6 girls who reciprocally nominated each other as friends were invited to take part in the study. 5 of the 6 participated in the study.



Reliability & Validity

- Systematic, cyclical process of analysis
- Interpretative process checked by a colleague familiar with IPA
- Participant validation of emerging themes
- Verbatim extracts present a 'grounding in examples'

Many researchers argue that the traditional concepts of reliability and validity should be conceptualised as trustworthiness, rigor and quality.

Credibility checks are a key way of ensuring the rigour of qualitative research.

The interpretative process was checked by a colleague familiar with IPA in order to ensure that it could be followed from the raw data to superordinate themes.

Participant validation: participants were invited to comment on the interpretations made by the researcher, via a face-to-face group meeting.

'Grounding in examples': allows the reader to make his/her own assessment of the interpretations presented.



Data Collection

- Semi-structured interviews
- Diary entries
- Participant observation

Individual interviews: Aim to elicit detailed stories, thoughts and feelings from participants. Schedule was designed to elicit experiences (e.g. ‘What are your best experiences of being in your friendship group?’), understandings (e.g. ‘What do you get from knowing each other?’), and contextual information (e.g. ‘When do you have contact with your friends in a typical school day?’).

Due to participants’ age, subsidiary prompts and concrete cues (e.g. school map and timelines) were used to support them in giving full responses.

40 mins – 1 hour duration; audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

Diary entries: participants were invited to keep diary entries of their friendship experiences over 2 weeks to encourage reflection on times when they have needed support from their friends.

Participant observation: interview data was contextualised through participant observation (consistent with CP’s emphasis on ‘person-in-context’)

Took place in participants’ form room, a site identified in interviews as significant to their experiences of social support during school day. Researcher sat with the adolescents during break and lunch period on one day.



Analysis

- Followed analytic procedure for IPA outlined by Smith *et al.* (2009)
- Verbatim interview transcripts
- Move from descriptive to interpretative
- Close analysis of each individual transcript before searching for shared themes across accounts

Close line-by-line reading of the transcript to become familiar with the interview content.

Initial notes were made on the transcript including: descriptive comments (significant or interesting things the participant was saying); comments on the participant's specific use of language; connections between different aspects of the transcript and; conceptual comments and questions about how the participant understands the phenomenon of social support.

Developing emergent themes: transcript and initial notes were re-examined to identify themes as they emerged chronologically through the account.

Initial comments were rephrased into interpretative phrases, capturing what had been found in the text, while drawing upon extant literature.

Searching for connections across themes: emergent themes were mapped out on post-its and arranged into clusters which were labelled as superordinate themes

Once each transcript had been analysed, I searched for shared themes across cases and for distinctive variations on those themes. Links between these themes and the data set were checked through a final re-reading of original transcripts to ensure that interpretations were grounded in participants' accounts.

Findings – emerging themes

Theme	Subtheme
Being there	Fulfilling the need to talk
	Engaging in social activity
	Offering practical support
Group belonging	Sharing interests
	Social identity
	Social acceptance / validation
Influence of context	School environment
	Community environment



Being there

- Captures the meaning of social support for the participants
- A need for the constant presence of similar others with whom to share the school experience
- *'Like somebody that's always there for you and somebody that's kind of like you'*
- *'Having friends that are like you, you don't feel so alone'*

A powerful theme which seemed to capture the meaning of social support for the participants.

Interpreted as a need for the constant presence of similar others with whom to share the school experience. Contrasted with 'being alone'.



Group belonging

- A sense of being connected to others in the friendship group contributes to a positive social identity
 - *'we all keep secrets'; 'we've never talked about each other behind our backs'*
 - *'I think our group is what exactly what friendship should be like. It shouldn't be any arguing, it should just be school life and everything like that, and that's what it is'*
 - *'sometimes you're in a group of people and you'll like conform so because they're mean you'll be mean or because they're really shy and quiet you'll be shy and quiet. Having friends that are like you, you don't feel so alone'*

Shows how the adolescents' social support experiences are influenced by group processes. A sense of being connected to others in the friendship group was richly illustrated in participants' accounts and revealed how social support provisions at the group level may be unique, or at least different to the benefits gained from dyadic peer relationships.

Belonging to a friendship group has provided an important socially supportive function for these adolescents through contributing to a positive social identity. The group has constructed a common ideology or vision through which members can develop a strong sense of who they are as a group and as individuals, and norms upon which they can base their self-esteem through mutual approval and validation.



Influence of context

- Streaming & classroom seating plans:
 - *'we didn't really talk to each other but then obviously cos we had to sit next to each other and most of the time we had to work together, we just found things that we liked'*
- Home locality:
 - *'I think the distance is a big problem I suppose. If they all lived local it would be a lot easier. Probably we don't meet up as much as we'd like'*
- Role of the Internet in providing social support

School and community contexts shape experiences of social support

School: Ability grouping in core subjects & seating plans: affects frequency of participants' contact during the school day. Impact on friendship formation – reflects social phenomenon - interactions between individuals tend to become increasingly positive if they are brought into regular contact through physical proximity (Zajonc, 1968).

School rule: break and lunch time pupils can use their own form rooms for socialising but are not allowed into other form rooms. Creates self-contained groups of friends who do not tend to mix socially with pupils outside of their form. Also, physical location of form room reinforces sense of togetherness but can be experienced as isolating. (Participant observation)

Community: Distance between participants' homes impacts upon the nature but not the frequency of their contact, as they make use of electronic means of keeping in touch (e.g. Facebook and MSN).



Implications for practice

- Capitalise on social support provided by naturally occurring friendship groups within school
- Preventative efforts at the start of Y7 / transition to ensure pupils do not become socially isolated
- Recognise and harness the role of the Internet as a context for social support in adolescence

Rather than directly intervening in the dynamics of friendship groups, professionals should offer more general input on communication and social skills which may serve to strengthen the bonds within them.

This study highlights benefits being missed by adolescents who are socially isolated or excluded within secondary school.

Preventative efforts to facilitate peer relationships are needed at the start of Year 7/ during transition from primary school, before friendship groups become established.

Teachers could plan and provide support for group interactions in the classroom through regular use of co-operative small group work and collaborative projects.

It is unlikely that the social support provisions highlighted in participants' accounts could be supplied by adults or assigned peer mentors. Providing support was a reciprocal process - adolescents shared supportive interactions during school day through 'being there' for one another, and because the friendship group provided an arguably unique context for identity formation through mutual similarity, approval and expectations among group members. Practitioners should focus on facilitating naturally occurring supportive relationships between peers.



Implications for EP practice

- Be cautious in recommending interventions such as circle of friends and peer buddy systems
- Play a greater role in ensuring that school contexts are more facilitative of socially supportive experiences through attention to features of the environment and school systems

EPs should perhaps be more cautious in recommending interventions such as 'circle of friends' and assigned buddies or mentors. Rather, they should adopt an approach which capitalises on naturally occurring support systems in young people's various social contexts and searches for any existing strengths and resources within peer relationships, before attempting to intervene with artificially cultivated alternatives.

Findings have illustrated the importance of context and particularly the impact of features of the school environment and organisation on pupils' learning, behaviour and social and emotional well-being.

EPs should play a greater role in ensuring that education and community environments are more facilitative of social supportive experiences for children and young people.

Framework for Intervention: designed by EPs to help teachers tackle concerns about pupils' behaviour using environmental change. It covers a wide range of factors including whole-school policies and classroom organisation, but could be further developed to include more specific reference to the social context which is so crucial to young people's experiences in school.



Limitations

- Interpretation is bound within the limits of participants' ability to articulate their experiences
- Participants did not engage with diary exercise
- Period of participant observation was brief
- IPA is inevitably subjective
- Generalisation to wider populations should be approached with caution

Concern re whether adolescents would be able to communicate rich texture of their experiences. But I wanted to allow participants to present their own perspective on social support. This required some additional thought and preparation into appropriate ways of eliciting responses from young people.

Diaries: no additional data were produced through diary-keeping. Motivation and commitment could have been increased through using instant messaging.

Participant observation: brief and therefore limited. Difficult to observe yp and expect them to continue with typical activities with little evidence of influence of observer.

It is possible for numerous interpretations to be made using IPA. However, analysis is a rigorous process (ref to earlier slide).

Sample is not representative of all adolescent girls – generalisations should be made with caution. But this was not the purpose of the study. Wanted to engage at an idiographic level and produce in-depth analysis of the accounts of a small number of participants. Adds to a growing number of detailed, small-scale, complementary qualitative studies which are furthering our understanding of the way in which social support functions for children and adolescents.



Future directions

- Conduct similar studies in other contexts to enrich the description of the phenomenon of social support from the perspective of CYP
- Investigate differences in the way social support is experienced in friendship groups and dyadic peer relationships
- Use longitudinal data to explore the way in which social support is defined and redefined by CYP over time

In order to be able to make more general claims about yp's understandings and experiences of social support, results of this exploratory research need to be examined in other adolescent populations.

E.g., within all-male and gender-mixed friendship groups, as well as those that are community-based, and consist of CYP from different ethnic backgrounds.

This study has highlighted groups as significant providers of social support in the lives of yp and raises the possibility that the nature of support received from group membership is different to that offered by dyadic peer relationships.

Future research could investigate the extent to which adolescents' social support is derived from friendship groups rather than dyadic relationships and any differences in the way such support is understood and experienced by adolescents.

The friendship group is a dynamic rather than a static entity and is manifested differently at different ages, so the nature of social support provided by the friendship group and the way in which it is defined and redefined by individuals will also change over time. Conduct longitudinal research / series of case studies would add to explore how social support is understood and experienced over time.



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CHAPTER TWO

SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE: **CONTEXT, CURRENT LITERATURE AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE** **RESEARCH**

SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE:
CONTEXT, CURRENT LITERATURE AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE
RESEARCH

Abstract

Social support is a concept that has been studied extensively from both research and theoretical perspectives (Hupcey, 1998). The study of social support in childhood and adolescence is particularly significant because children have a great need for instrumental and emotional resources from others (Belle, 1989).

A review of the literature examining social support for children and young people is presented and critiqued. A community psychology perspective, which positions social support as relevant to important current social issues, contributes to the critique. It is argued that the study of social support has been limited by its reliance on a quantitative and deductive approach to research, which is unable to provide a detailed account of how children and young people use and understand the concept.

This paper advocates a qualitative and contextualised approach to studying social support in order to ensure that future research, intervention and practice are grounded in children's own interpretations of social support, thus increasing the understanding and utility of the concept. In keeping with a community psychology perspective, future research should avoid individualising social support, and instead view it as a characteristic of groups, settings or communities (Orford, 2008).

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1. Introduction

1.1 Importance of social support

It has long been known that one of the key protections against depression and other mental health disorders is having good social support (Hall & Marzillier, 2009). In a 2004 survey of the prevalence of mental disorders amongst children and young people in Great Britain, Green *et al.* (2005) reported that the relationship between availability of social support and mental health, which is well established for adults, also existed for young people. The *Brighter Futures* research conducted by The Mental Health Foundation suggests that pupils' supportive relationships and support networks play an important role in emotional resilience (Alexander, 2002). Furthermore, guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE; 2005) cite availability of social support as a factor for consideration when assessing a child or young person for depression in primary care.

In adopting a largely qualitative and collaborative approach, the national CAMHS review (Department of Health, 2008) asked children and young people to describe what 'made them feel good inside' or what things they thought were important for their well-being. One of three factors consistently mentioned was 'having good support networks - across family, friends and school' (p.23). In further exploring sources of social support, children and young people were asked about who they

would turn to when they needed help. They cited 'close family', 'close friend' and 'teacher' amongst those in the 'inner circle', whom they value and trust (p.35).

The importance of social support is brought into sharper focus at a time of growing concern over the mental health and psychological well-being of children and young people in the United Kingdom. A wide-ranging study by UNICEF (2007) found that child well-being in the UK was lower than in twenty other industrialised countries. Green *et al.*'s (2005) comprehensive mental health survey found that one in 10 children and young people (10 per cent) aged 5 to 16 had a clinically diagnosed mental disorder, defined as a 'set of symptoms or behaviour associated in most cases with considerable distress and substantial interference with personal functions' (p.8).

Many more children and young people may experience mental health problems that are less severe, but which may nonetheless affect their social, emotional and behavioural functioning in schools and communities (Greig, 2007). For example, a recent survey of 700 teachers, support staff and school leaders found that over 70 per cent felt that pupils face more pressure and stress than a decade ago, caused by testing and exams, family break-up, body image, and lack of parental support (Association of Teachers and Lecturers, 2009). Respondents reported that the stress experienced by children and young people resulted in wide ranging deleterious effects including low self-esteem, lack of motivation, eating disorders, alcohol abuse, self-harm and attempted suicide. As a result, school staff reported spending increasing amounts of their time offering one-to-one support to pupils with emotional and/or mental health problems, with 70 per cent of respondents personally

supporting pupils at least once a week and over a quarter personally supporting pupils more than once a day.

1.2 National policy context

The government White Paper *Every Child Matters* (ECM; Department for Education and Skills, 2003) which has promoted a more holistic approach to public sector provisions for the well-being of children and young people, and national initiatives such as Extended Services, the Healthy Schools Programme, and the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) curriculum, all provide a context for exploring and promoting social support for children and young people. Education is no longer defined in very narrow terms, with a sole focus on schooling, subjects, targets and tests. Rather, schools are expected to take a central role in promoting and providing for children's social and emotional well-being, as an important factor in pupils' 'readiness for learning'.

The concept of social support also has important implications for the *Community Cohesion* agenda in schools (DCSF, 2007), through its link with social capital. A research report commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, examined three kinds of social capital that are of particular concern to the Every Child Matters and Community Cohesion agendas: sense of school belonging; access to social support networks; and attitudes to social diversity (Stevens *et al.*, 2007). One particularly interesting finding was that close relationships with 'significant others' seemed to be correlated with lower levels of stress and more engagement with school, suggesting that social support may well enhance pupils' learning experiences. The authors concluded that developing community cohesion in schools

cannot be seen in isolation from, amongst other things, improving pupils' access to social support.

A further indication of the receptive context for prioritising social support for children and young people is its mention in a number of key documents. For example, 'Developing emotional health and well-being: a whole-school approach to improving behaviour and attendance' (DfES, 2005) acknowledges the importance of caring and supportive relationships in producing high levels of attainment and attendance, as well as greater enjoyment of school, increased motivation, and better learning. It cites positive trusting relationships with staff as a resilience factor for pupils. Building positive peer relationships is highlighted in guidance for the *Targeted Mental Health in Schools* Project (TaMHS; DCSF, 2008), which promotes an ecological approach to mental health, in viewing the child not just in terms of their problems or needs, but in relation to the environments and structures of which they are part (family, peer group, class, school, wider community). It outlines the theory and rationale for peer support models such as peer mentoring, peer listening and peer mediation.

1.3 Contribution of community psychology

A community psychology orientation contributes to the current review by providing a lens through which to appraise the social support literature. The decision to use community psychology to contribute to this critique is in part due to the author's own growing interest in the discipline.

The definition of community psychology is subject to healthy debate in this country. Orford (1992) offers the following explication:

‘Community psychology is about understanding people within their social worlds and using this understanding to improve people’s well-being. It is about understanding and helping. Thus it is both an area of research and a branch of the academic study of psychology and at the same time a branch of a helping profession. It stands, too, on a bridge between the psyche and the social, the private and the public’ (p.vii).

While psychology has traditionally focused on the individual level of analysis, community psychology adopts a more holistic, ecological analysis of the person within multiple social systems. Community psychology tends to focus on the strengths of people and their communities, rather than focusing on individual or community deficits or problems. It emphasises the importance of prevention and early intervention, and aims to promote competence and wellness through self-help, community development and social action. The ‘client’ is seen as an active participant who exercises choice and self-direction, while the professional moves from the role of expert to collaborator (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

Those who identify with community psychology come from a variety of other branches of psychology, including applied, social, clinical, health, educational and occupational psychology. Furthermore, community psychology promotes collaborations and alliances between psychology and other disciplines that share some of its orientation, including applied social studies, anthropology, public health and epidemiology, social and environmental geography, urban and developmental studies (Orford *et al.*, undated).

At the very heart of community psychology is the need to see people – their feelings, thoughts and actions – within a social context (Orford, 2008). The concept of social support therefore, is given centrality within community psychology, as a key resource to human development and well-being which lies at the interface between

the individual and the social systems of which he or she is a part (Orford, 1992). As such, community psychology is a fitting lens through which to view the existing body of literature on social support.

Furthermore, social support is considered relevant to important current social issues. Community psychologists view themselves as having an important part to play in researching, commenting on, and taking action about social matters of national importance (Orford *et al.*, undated). As an applied, practical subject concerning itself with changing lives for the better, a community psychology orientation contributes to this review a critical consideration of how theorists and researchers make explicit links with intervention and practice, in order to ensure that social support is conceptualised in a way that is useful and relevant for individual people in their natural settings and social systems (Orford, 1992).

1.4 Aims / focus of the paper

The overall purpose of this paper is to review existing literature on social support for children and young people in order to explore the ways in which social support has been conceptualised and studied, and whether this has contributed to a greater understanding of how social support is perceived and used by children and young people.

The review aims to address the following questions:

- How has social support been defined / conceptualised?
- In what ways can the research be categorised so as to gain an overview of different approaches to studying the concept of social support?
- What are the limitations of the research?

- What gaps exist in the current research that could be addressed by future studies?

1.5 Search strategies

Sources were identified from a range of academic databases using the University of Birmingham elibrary service. The databases included *ASSIA*, *Education* (SAGE), *ERIC* and *Psychology* (SAGE).

Social support and children / adolescents were initially entered as keywords but produced an unwieldy number of articles. Using Boolean logic, these search terms were subsequently combined with a range of other keywords such as: *school*, *quantitative*, *qualitative* and *community psychology*. The abstracts and references of resulting articles were explored for their pertinence to the review.

These searches uncovered many, but not all of the articles used in this paper. As the focus of the literature review became more refined, a snowball technique was used to identify further relevant articles. This involved following up references from the articles found through initial database searches. These references were obtained and further relevant references were identified from the text, and so on. In total more than 90 articles from a range of journals were identified and examined to determine their relevance to the questions being considered. The initial searches were carried out in early 2009, with additional database searches conducted up until the time of submission (June 2010).

Due to the extensiveness of the social support literature, which spans numerous disciplines, the searches cannot be said to exhaustive. The review of the research literature is necessarily confined to studies of perceived social support, to the

exclusion of studies on enacted support and social support networks, which are considered to be distinctive and substantial areas of the literature beyond the scope of this paper.

2. Conceptualising social support

The term *social support* has been in use since the 1970s, and theoretical discussions and empirical studies of social support abound in the literature. However, due to its complex nature, establishing a clear understanding of what is meant by the term social support has proven challenging. Furthermore, theory and research rarely seem to link directly with intervention and practice, and the term social support appears to hold little understanding and utility amongst policy makers and practitioners who are in a position to identify and meet the support needs of children and young people (e.g. Williams *et al.*, 2004).

When social support was initially examined during the mid-1970s to early 1980s, the concept was used in concrete terms, referring to an interaction, person or relationship (Hupcey, 1998). The classic definition by Cobb (1976) described social support as information from others that one is loved and cared for, valued and esteemed, and part of a social network. House (1981) described four types of social support: emotional (liking, love, empathy, trust); instrumental (providing goods or services, such as money or time); informational (advice, suggestions or directives); and appraisal (information relevant to self-evaluation).

According to Hupcey (1998), the term has become increasingly abstract over the years, with almost any type of social interaction considered social support. Barrera (1986) also argues that definitions of social support are often so vague or so broad

that the concept is in danger of losing its distinctiveness. Other authors such as Tardy (1985, cited in Del Valle *et al.*, 2010) stressed the complexity of the social support concept in terms of measurement, identifying five dimensions: direction (support given or received); disposition (available or enacted); description (social support described or assessed in some way); content (emotional, instrumental, informational or appraisal support), and network (parents, teachers, peers, etc).

Many researchers (e.g. Vaux, 1988; Cohen, 1992) now agree that social support is a multidimensional construct that cannot be captured by a single definition. In recognition of the complexity of social support, Vaux (1988) defined it as a metaconstruct encompassing three distinct conceptual components: support network resources, supportive behaviours and subjective appraisals of support. These social support concepts tend to be treated as separate constructs for investigation, with most research falling into one of the three categories (Barrera, 1986; Hupcey, 1998).

Support network resources are defined as the set of relationships through which an individual receives help in dealing with demands and achieving goals (Vaux, 1988). Research which adopts a structural approach to social support focuses on certain aspects of the structure of networks of relationships, such as size and adjacency density (Orford, 1992). This approach is epitomised by social network analysis which emphasises quantifiable methods of describing the network of people within an individual's social world and the interrelationships among these people (Belle, 1989; Barrera, 2000).

Vaux (1988) describes supportive behaviours as the specific acts intending to help someone (e.g. emotional, guidance, practical). This construct is also sometimes referred to as received or enacted support. Measures of received social support

instruct respondents to recall specific examples of behaviour rather than general impressions, so they are thought more accurately to reflect actual support provided (Haber *et al.*, 2007).

In contrast to received support is the construct of perceived social support. Vaux (1988) defines subjective appraisals as the evaluations that people make of their support network resources and the behaviours that occur within these relationships. Many social support researchers use measures of perceived social support which consist of fixed choice categories or Likert scales. Sarason *et al.* (1990) claimed that a full picture of a person's psychological situation can only be obtained after asking that person about the amount and quality of social support they are receiving. However, the use of perceptions of available and received social support remains controversial. According to Hupcey (1998), some argue that perceptions are inaccurate and do not reflect the support that is available or what has been provided, while others argue that perceptions, though not always accurate, are still extremely influential in determining the satisfaction with and the outcome of the support.

2.1 Critical reflections

From a community psychology perspective, there is much to criticise about the way that social support has been conceptualised in the literature. Orford (1992, 2008) argues that social support has largely been treated as a within-person construct (i.e. something that a person possesses). Very rarely has social support been seen as a characteristic of groups or settings, and not of individuals at all. Barrera (2000) agrees, stating that social support research frequently assesses concepts such as psychological symptoms and stress that are evaluated with the individual as the unit

of analysis. Barrera (2000) also argues that, although social network analysis lends itself to research strategies that use the network as the unit of analysis, most network analyses identify personal networks because they are based on the reports of a single informant.

A hallmark of community psychology is its concern with people within the context of their own natural settings and social systems (Orford, 1992). There is a strong belief within the discipline that people cannot be understood apart from their context (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). In a critical analysis of definitions of social support, Williams and colleagues (2004) commented on the 'generalized, or global, nature' (p.957) of the definitions reviewed. Such observations have also been made by the authors of some of the definitions (e.g. House, 1981; Barrera, 1986; Hupcey, 1998). Although not writing from a community psychology standpoint, Williams *et al.* (2004) highlight the importance of contextual detail in conceptualising social support in a more useful and relevant way:

'To not know the detail of social support in a particular context will lead to problems in assessing social support and undertaking intervention' (p.954).

Thus, Williams *et al.* (2004) argue that understanding the concept through an analysis of the academic literature alone is inadequate. Such an approach has led to little agreement among authors about the theoretical and operational definitions of the concept (Hupcey, 1998). Instead, they advocate a qualitative and contextual approach to the definition of social support, through research that presents the viewpoint of those experiencing a particular situation.

The next section discusses the ways in which social support for children and young people has been typically studied by researchers.

3. Deductive approach to social support research

Research on social support has been dominated by traditional research design and a deductive hypothesis-testing approach. Such an approach starts with a priori theories and models to be tested. The researcher collects data to evaluate the adequacy of the hypothesis, and ultimately the theory. The research is informed by a set of assumptions from a positivist paradigm, which place emphasis on objectivity and discovering generalisable rules (Robson, 2002).

Most studies of social support have used a quantitative research methodology. Data collection methods commonly include questionnaires consisting of measures of perceived social support and other variables, which use a Likert-type format. Such questionnaires are strongly associated with statistical analysis (Dunne *et al.*, 2005). The quantitative literature in this body of research has largely relied on correlation to show the relationship between social support and various outcomes, such as well-being and academic achievement (e.g. DuBois *et al.*, 1994; Zimmerman *et al.*, 2000; Murberg & Bru, 2004; Benhorin & McMahon, 2008).

Many of these studies examine two theoretical models of social support: the 'main-effect' and 'stress-buffering' models (Cohen & Wills, 1985). These hypotheses suggest that social support may benefit individuals in two different ways. According to the direct or main-effect model, social support has positive effects on individuals regardless of the level of stress experienced. The stress-buffering model suggests that social support moderates the relation between stress and a wide range of psychological, behavioural and health-related outcomes (Cohen & Wills, 1985), such that social support has a more substantial and beneficial impact on those who experience higher levels of stress than those who have lower levels of stress.

3.1 Main-effect model

The main-effect model is well-supported by research with adolescent populations (Benhorin & McMahon, 2008). Social support from parents, teachers and peers has been found to promote a range of positive outcomes in children and young people, as well as reduce negative outcomes.

Parental or family support has been associated with increased self-esteem (Franco & Levitt, 1998), well-being and coping strategies (Bal *et al.*, 2003), sense of community in school (Vieno *et al.*, 2007), school-related interest and a desire to achieve academically (Wentzel, 1998), as well as with lower levels of school failure (Domagala-Zysk, 2006), conduct problems and psychological distress (DuBois *et al.*, 1994). For example, in a longitudinal study of 173 urban African-American male adolescents, Zimmerman and colleagues (2000) found that parental support had a direct effect on psychological symptoms, predicting less anxiety and depression concurrently and prospectively.

Perceived support from teachers is related to higher levels of motivation and engagement (Ryan & Patrick, 2001), school- and class-related interest and efforts to comply with classroom norms (Wentzel, 1998). Perceived teacher support is also related to lower levels of self-reported pupil misbehaviour (Bru *et al.*, 2001) and teacher-reported aggressive behaviour (Benhorin & McMahon, 2008). In a study of the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage, life stress, and social support on adolescent adjustment, DuBois and colleagues (1994) found that support received from school personnel was associated with a variety of positive outcomes among students who experienced socioeconomic disadvantage, including higher grades, fewer suspensions, and lower levels of substance use.

The evidence for a main-effect of peer support has been less consistent. Support from peers has been found to be associated with sense of community in school and self-efficacy (Vieno *et al.*, 2007), motivation to display prosocial behaviours (Wentzel, 1998), and fewer emotional problems (Murberg & Bru, 2004). Although it is generally accepted that supportive peer relationships can minimise depression episodes by providing a buffer for stressful events (Bagwell *et al.*, 2005), Zimmerman and colleagues (2000) found that friend support was unrelated to anxiety and depression in their sample of African-American adolescents.

It seems then that while many studies have provided support for the main-effect model, results have been mixed, depending on the source of support, resulting in a somewhat complex picture. In a study examining the role of social support on the relation between exposure to violence and aggressive behaviour, Benhorin and McMahon (2008) illustrate the differential impact of various sources of support on various settings for young people. The study used multiple sources of support (parents, teachers, classmates and close friends) to explore the effects that each of these had on the behaviour of urban African-American male adolescents in different settings, as assessed from multiple perspectives (self, classmates and teacher). Parent, teacher and close friend support had a significant main effect on teacher-reported aggressive behaviour, but not on self- or peer-reported aggressive behaviour. Thus, more perceived support from key providers seems to have a more positive impact on young people's behaviour in some (e.g. the classroom) but not all (e.g. home, community) settings.

3.2 Stress-buffering model

Fewer studies have investigated the stress-buffering hypothesis among children and young people, and those that have, report inconsistent findings.

Murberg and Bru (2004), for instance, found some evidence for the buffer effects of social support among adolescent girls but not boys in a study of the relationships between social support, negative life events and emotional problems among Norwegian adolescents. They examined the stress buffering effects of perceived social support from parents, friends and teachers among a sample of fourteen- and fifteen-year olds exposed to negative life events, such as parental divorce and mental, physical or sexual harassment. Results for female adolescents supported the assumption that parental support can moderate the relationship between negative life events and emotional problems. No such buffering effects were found for support from parents among male adolescents.

A study by DuBois *et al.* (1992) employed a two-year longitudinal design to examine the relation of stressful life events and social support to psychological distress and school performance among early adolescents in the United States. Perceived social support from teachers and school personnel buffered the relation between stressful life events and psychological distress.

Benhorin and McMahon (2008) found some support for the stress-buffering model in their study of urban African-American male adolescents. While there was no evidence for a buffering effect of parental, teacher or close friend support on aggressive behaviour, social support from classmates was found to buffer the impact of violence on peer-reported aggressive behaviour, with a more positive effect for those students who had experienced higher levels of violence.

Other studies have not found support for the stress-buffering model. In an earlier study, using a similar sample of African-American adolescents, Zimmerman and colleagues (2000) did not find buffer effects of social support. Data on parental and friend support, stressful life events, alcohol and substance use, delinquency, and psychological symptoms were collected twice, six months apart, through verbally administered structured questionnaires. Findings did not support the stress-buffering model for any of the outcomes.

In a Norwegian study examining the relationship between school-related stress, social support from teachers and classmates, and somatic complaints amongst adolescents, school-related social support did not buffer the stress from school demands, such that the relationship between stress and somatic complaints was the same for students with high or low levels of perceived support (Torsheim & Wold, 2001).

In all, the stress-buffering effect of social support has not been proven to be reliable (Barrera, 2000). According to Benhorin and McMahon (2008), there is a scarcity of research with regard to the buffering effect of perceived support from parents, teachers and peers. Of the studies that have been conducted, few have found evidence for the stress buffering effect of social support for children and young people.

3.3 Critical reflections

The social support studies reviewed in this section have all adopted a deductive and quantitative approach to research, favouring a 'top-down' conceptualisation of social support. These studies demonstrate that social support is associated with a

wide range of positive outcomes for children and young people. They also provide evidence for the two different ways in which individuals come to benefit from social support. An understanding of the main-effect and stress-buffering models has practical as well as theoretical importance because each has direct implications for the design of interventions (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Both hypotheses may have validity in that social support may be directly helpful in all circumstances, but may be particularly effective as a buffer during times of stress (Zimet *et al.*, 1988).

It should be noted, however, that the empirical findings are at best inconsistent and at worst conflicting. Schwarzer and Leppin (1991) point to methodological problems in social support research, suggesting that the instruments used have evolved from different concepts of social support and thus produce different results. Zimmerman *et al.* (2000) argue that more relevant measures may be needed to test stress-buffering mechanisms to ensure that concepts are tailored more specifically for different contexts and populations. Indeed, it is argued here that measuring social support in an objective and universal way, by using predetermined questions and standardised measures, not only fails to capture the diversity of children's experiences of social support, but also obscures local, contextual meanings (Stewart, 2000). In other words, we lose sight of the variability and complexities in young people's interpretations of their social support experiences within the social and cultural contexts that hold significance for them.

Further limitations of using a deductive, quantitative approach to studying social support should be considered. The studies reviewed here have involved the quantification of perceptions of social support through social support scales which use fixed choice categories (e.g. 'yes', 'no', 'don't know') or a Likert format (e.g.

'really true for me' or 'sort of true for me'). The questionnaire text and pre-selected categories are influenced by the researcher's understanding of the concept of social support (Williams *et al.*, 2004). The researcher has explicitly constructed the field through his or her theoretical and social position, substantive interests and biography (Dunne *et al.*, 2005). Thus, children and young people are confined to responding to how the researcher has conceptualised their meanings and experiences of social support as well as being constrained to a focus on degree of experience rather than on the experience of itself.

Williams *et al.* (2004) point out that a concept like social support is used and understood in a myriad of ways. Yet data from a fixed-response questionnaire tend to conform to the singular account of the researcher (Dunne *et al.*, 2005). This is because a deductive approach to research imposes the meaning of social support on the context being studied. The experience of social support is fixed in predefined categories by researchers, rather than expressed in its own terms by participants. There is no way of knowing whether the measures used reflect the meaning of social support to the participants being studied (Williams *et al.*, 2004). The lack of clarity that exists in the theoretical literature about the meaning of social support, and the failure of most researchers to explore its meaning amongst the populations being studied, may provide an explanation for the inconsistent empirical findings discussed earlier.

It is argued by Williams and colleagues (2004) that the only way to ensure that researchers have captured the meaning of social support is to ask the question, 'How do the people I wish to study use and understand the concept of social support'? Thus, the meaning of social support can be explored by employing qualitative

methods to ask children about their understandings of social support. Furthermore, qualitative work is more likely to illuminate how lives are led locally and in context (Orford, 2008). This concern with people within the context of their own settings and systems is a hallmark of community psychology (Orford, 1992). It also resonates with social anthropology, where local and detailed accounts serve to uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular settings come to understand and account for day-to-day situations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this way, a carefully chosen qualitative methodology can provide rich and contextualised data on the ways in which social support exists and functions for children and adolescents within the social contexts that hold significance for them.

4. Inductive approach to social support research

Studies which adopt an inductive approach to researching social support are relatively sparse. It was argued in the previous section that the meaning of social support to children and young people is not well-established in the research literature due to the dominance of quantitative studies which employ a deductive, hypothesis-testing approach. In inductive research, theory emerges from the data, ensuring that our understanding of social support is grounded in the views and experiences of children and young people. During the research process, the researcher's initial hunches and conjectures are gradually refined and reformulated in a continual process which serves to focus analysis and reorganise data collection (Scott, 1996). Thus, the research process is more open-ended, exploratory, adventurous and discovery-oriented (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

Inductive inquiry is usually associated with the use of qualitative methods in research, such as case studies, interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and field notes. Such research is generally informed by an interpretive paradigm which aims to understand the subjective world of human experience (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). The focus is not on devising a universal theory, but on generating sets of meanings of people's behaviours as varied as the situations and contexts supporting them (Cohen *et al.*, 2000).

A search of the social support literature revealed a small number of recent studies (2000 – present day), which used a qualitative, inductive approach to illuminate the experience and meaning of social support, as shared by children and young people in a range of contexts. A number of exemplars were chosen and are discussed in detail in this section.

The literature search revealed two studies which focused on the social support experiences of Mexican-origin adolescents in the United States (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005; Sanchez *et al.*, 2006). Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2005) used in-depth interviews to examine the peer network as a context for social and emotional support, while Sanchez and colleagues (2006) examined young people's relationships with non-parental adults who served a mentoring function in their lives.

The data from the study by Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2005) showed that adolescents were immersed in complex peer relationships, and participants 'expressed a mixture of exhilaration and exasperation at the effort required to sustain these friendships' (p.386). The authors argue that supportive peer relationships appear to provide the resources necessary not only to foster developmental gains (e.g. social skills) and school achievement, but to buffer the adolescent from

environmental stressors (e.g. family poverty, community violence). Non-romantic relationships between adolescent males and females were found to be particularly beneficial. It was concluded that the formation of supportive peer relationships requires a facilitating institutional context, in providing young people with the opportunity to get to know and learn to trust one another.

Sanchez and colleagues (2006) adopted a grounded theory approach to data analysis which yielded some interesting qualitative insights about social support providers, forms of support provided, areas of life in which the adolescents were supported, and the benefits of receiving this support. A finding unique to the study was that nonparental adults who played a mentoring function sometimes modelled what *not* to do in life. Observing nonparental adults experience negative situations and engage in undesirable behaviours 'seemed to motivate adolescents to take different paths' (p.627). In addition, few researchers had previously asked adolescents and nonparental adults about the perceived benefits of these supportive relationships for adolescents. The four major benefit domains were intrapersonal development (e.g. improved self-esteem), interpersonal development (e.g. learning how to handle romantic relationships), school-related (e.g. improvements in grades), and behavioural (e.g. staying out of trouble). While Sanchez *et al.*'s (2006) study adds further support to the existing literature (e.g. Beam *et al.*, 2002) about the important role that nonparental adults play in normative adolescent development, as a grounded theory study it arguably does not go far enough in 'lifting' the data to a more conceptual explanatory level.

A number of qualitative studies have focused on the perceptions of social support amongst adolescents with illnesses and disabilities (e.g. Antle *et al.*, 2009; Cassano

et al., 2008; Ishibashi, 2001; Woodgate, 2006). Woodgate (2006) used qualitative data to develop a detailed context-specific definition of social support which formed part of a substantive theory of adolescents' cancer experiences. Open-ended interviews, participant observation and focus groups were conducted with fifteen adolescents at an inpatient and outpatient paediatric cancer unit in western Canada. The substantive theory that emerged was entitled 'keeping the spirit alive'. It provides an understanding of how children and families used the core process of keeping their spirits alive in response to getting through the cancer experience. The social support present in the adolescents' lives was identified as a key intervening condition that influenced the use of the process. Woodgate (2006) delineated the degree and type of social support in three subcategories: supportive relationships; being there; and consequences of being there. The act of others 'being there' was seen by the adolescents as the key element of a supportive relationship, and viewed by the author as an important phenomenon which had received minimal attention in the paediatric oncology literature. It involved six main behaviours: being there to comfort me; being there to hold my hand; being there to keep me from feeling lonely; being there to help me feel like I have a life; being there to keep me positive; and being there for me despite everything. By elaborating and clearly defining categories of 'being there', Woodgate (2006) is able to offer a comprehensive understanding of what social support means to adolescents with cancer, which aids utility of the definition and allows it to be operationalised in the context of paediatric oncology nursing.

Halpenny and colleagues (2008) studied the available support for children following parental separation. They used semi-structured interviews to elicit children's

perspectives on the role played by informal (e.g. family, friends) and formal (e.g. counselling services) support in helping them to cope with and adjust to the changes in their family contexts. The study was carried out in the Republic of Ireland with sixty children in two age groups (8–11 years and 13–17 years). Children's narratives of the process of the separation and how their family lives were affected were described by the authors as 'often sophisticated, reflecting an acute awareness of family life and the ability to review and revise their own perspectives and understanding of what happened within their family' (p.321). Most children valued support from both formal and informal sources, with the family being the preferred source of support for the majority of children. The findings highlighted developmental patterns in children's narratives, with younger children favouring activities that offered opportunities for distraction, while older children valued opportunities for communicating their feelings about and responses to the separation, with peers or professionals. The authors suggest that adolescents may benefit from a peer group model of support provision, which none of the children in the older age group had access to in the study.

In a feminist study of pregnant adolescents' experiences of receiving social support, Logsdon and colleagues (2005) used the metaphor of a patchwork quilt to represent how adolescents have to 'piece together' the support they need from adults, peers and partners who are often unreliable. The findings emerged from data collected through focus groups with thirty participants who attended a public school for pregnant and parenting adolescents in the Southern United States. The study provides a rich picture of how social support is experienced by these teenagers in the context of their complex lives as they try to meet the developmental needs of pregnancy and adolescence whilst also facing multiple challenges (e.g. financial

concerns, exposure to violence). Logsdon *et al.*'s (2005) qualitative approach to the meaning of social support does not attempt to generate a theoretical-level account but does succeed in illuminating the complexity of contextual influences impacting on social support for these adolescents, thus informing more appropriate clinical and community interventions.

4.1 Critical reflections

From a community psychology view-point, qualitative research is ideally suited as a method for induction rather than deduction, offering a 'thick' description which gets closer to the 'emic' or insider's view than is possible with forced-choice questionnaires developed from general theory (Orford, 2008). The qualitative studies reviewed here have succeeded, to varying extents, in capturing the complexity of social support for children and young people in the themes and categories generated from inductive inquiry. For example, the themes and concepts that emerged from Logsdon *et al.*'s (2005) study served to illuminate the complex reality of the lives of pregnant adolescents struggling to 'piece together' the support they need in the face of numerous challenges. A conceptualisation of social support that is derived from a deductive approach, and thus largely removed from real life, would be unlikely to fit such a context.

Furthermore, qualitative data can be used to generate or revise theories about social support through exploring adolescent experiences in various social contexts. Woodgate's (2006) study, for instance, generated a substantive theory, which is a theory that is applicable to a circumscribed topic or problem area (Orford, 1992). Thus, the definitions of 'keeping the spirit alive' and 'being there' are specific to the

experiences of adolescents with cancer. However, far from being a limitation, Williams *et al.* (2004) argue that definitions with restricted application are in fact powerful tools in research, intervention and practice within specific contexts.

These studies provide rich data covering many aspects of social support, including sources of support (e.g. Halpenny *et al.*, 2008), types of support (e.g. Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005), benefits of support (e.g. Sanchez *et al.*, 2006), perceived barriers to seeking support (e.g. Woodgate, 2006), limitations of available support (e.g. Logsdon *et al.*, 2005) and developmental differences in perspectives of social support (e.g. Halpenny *et al.*, 2008; Logsdon *et al.*, 2005). It is suggested, however, that the relatively large samples used by researchers precluded the kind of detailed examination of the 'particular' that one could achieve with a small sample or case study design. Stewart (2000) argues that, to the extent that problems and solutions are context-dependent and meaning-laden, descriptions of them need to be as detailed and contextualised as possible if we are to expect them to be useful to others. Williams *et al.* (2004) agree, stating that the details derived from a qualitative approach will aid understanding and utility of the definitions.

Children and young people have traditionally been positioned passively in research and have lacked the opportunity to analyse and represent their position (Veale, 2005). The studies reviewed here all placed importance on hearing the perspectives of adolescents, and ensuring that they are given the opportunity to define their own reality. This means that, in contrast to the quantitative research discussed earlier, the researchers avoid the imposition of potentially inappropriate constructs. Rather, flexible, open-ended data collection methods are used to ensure that the data generated 'are influenced more by the perspectives and experiences of

respondents than by the direction of the researcher' (Logsdon *et al.*, 2005, p608). Furthermore, results are couched in the language of those who occupy the settings in which the data were collected (Orford, 1992). Woodgate (2006), for example, delineated six key supportive behaviours from phrases used by the adolescents such as 'being there to help me feel like I have a life'.

However, Christensen and James (2000) remind us that in all research the relations and contexts within which communication takes place fundamentally shape the nature and outcome of the study. Reflexivity is an important criterion for judging the quality of qualitative research. Since the research process inevitably shapes the object of inquiry, the role of the researcher needs to be acknowledged (Willig, 2008). Of importance is the issue of power relations inherent between adults and children. In particular, power relations and generational differences cannot be eradicated in the context of the research interview (Christensen & James, 2000). It is important that researchers acknowledge this and consider ways to mitigate any negative implications. Logsdon and colleagues (2005), for example, used focus groups to enable participants to 'discuss their ideas and perceptions in a relaxed atmosphere' (p.608), and also gained feedback from pregnant adolescents, nurses and social workers on the environmental conditions needed for free and open sharing.

Whilst the authors of these studies should be applauded for employing different methods of understanding and representing young people's experiences of social support (e.g. in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation), they could perhaps have gone further in using more creative and participatory methods. Stewart (2000), writing from a community psychology standpoint, argues that a commitment to diversity should lead us to adapt our methods to our participants' experiences and

ways of understanding and communicating. In line with this, Christensen and James (2000) advocate encouraging young people to represent their feelings and beliefs in whatever ways are most meaningful to them, for example through drawings, mapping, or role-play. These creative methods 'can serve as constructivist tools to assist research participants to describe and analyse their experiences and give meaning to them' (Veale, 2005, p.254).

The studies reviewed here were conducted with specific and 'special' populations. The focus has been on children and young people in disadvantaged positions, affected by adverse life events or risk factors which are potentially damaging to their social and emotional development. Future research may wish to explore social support experiences that are more universally shared, and with a focus on strengths or competences, and contexts which have the potential to be enabling.

5. Concluding comments

5.1 Limitations of current research

The research literature on social support for children and young people has been presented as belonging to two different approaches to inquiry: a quantitative, deductive approach, and a qualitative, inductive approach. By distinguishing social support research in this way, it is not suggested that only one kind of process necessarily occurs during research, or that the two approaches cannot be complementary (see Hammersley, 1992). It is acknowledged that research often involves both inductive and deductive processes. In particular, few would argue that qualitative approaches are exclusively inductive (Scott, 1996). However, for the purpose of this review, this distinction has served to illustrate the different

approaches to how the concept of social support is studied, the relative merits and limitations of each, and the direction that new research could take.

Much of the research on social support has been dominated by a quantitative research design, exploring the relationship between social support and various psychological and behavioural outcomes. In contrast, qualitative research on social support has been conspicuous by its absence (Orford, 1992).

Whilst the existing empirical research has found that social support provides numerous benefits to children and young people, and has explored the mechanisms through which individuals come to benefit from it, this body of research has been plagued by conceptual and methodological problems. Different researchers have used different definitions and different measures of social support, leading to apparent inconsistencies. Furthermore, while quantitative methods are able to investigate the *who* (for example, the sources of social support) and *what* (for example, what are the effects of social support on emotional well-being?) of social support, they are unable to shed light on *how* children and young people experience social support, or importantly, how they interpret their social support experiences within the contexts that hold significance for them.

The qualitative studies reviewed here contribute important insights into adolescents' lived experiences of social support. According to Orford (2008), the kind of knowledge needed for practice in community psychology is likely to come from hearing directly from people about the reality of their lives. In comparison to quantitative research, these qualitative studies succeed to a far greater extent in capturing the nature, complexity and essence of these young people's social support experiences. Such data can aid the development of definitions and theories about

social support in various contexts, which can be used to inform intervention, practice and future research.

5.2 Future directions

Williams and colleagues (2004) propose a new approach to the way in which social support is defined and studied. They argue that this change should be away from a deductive hypothesis-testing approach to an inductive hypothesis-forming approach, by asking people what social support means to them.

It is important to define the concept of social support in a way that reflects the experiences and perceptions of children and adolescents because they have a great need for instrumental and emotional resources from others (Belle, 1989) and are functioning within increasingly demanding and stressful contexts (e.g. Association of Teachers & Lecturers, 2009).

By studying intensively and qualitatively how young people understand and experience social support, researchers can gain insight into the myriad of ways in which social support exists and functions within the complex social contexts in which children and adolescents live.

Future research could consider adopting an idiographic approach which deals with individuals' accounts in detail and in context, and has the potential to generate a rich and contextualised analysis of how social support is understood from the perspective of particular young people in a particular context. Such an 'emic' approach is similar to that employed by anthropologists conducting ethnographic research on a given community, with a focus on describing individuals' perspectives and interpretations of their world (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). This will allow confident conclusions to

be reached about the role of social support in these contexts, which in turn may advance theorising about social support, as well as inform intervention and practice. Furthermore, ethnography requires that the researcher moves away from their adult-centred understanding of a group or phenomena and instead seeks to understand the ways in which children actively shape or determine their own development and socialisation (Edmond, 2005).

Importantly though, community psychologists warn against treating social support in a narrow, person-centred way, arguing that researchers and practitioners have tended to individualise social support and have not found it easy to handle the idea that a person might get support from groups or from settings (Orford, 2008). Using the individual as the unit of analysis enables the researcher to listen to the voices of children and adolescents, and provides a detailed account of their lived experiences of social support. But at the same time, researchers should try not to neglect the importance of the interaction between the individual and the social systems of which he or she is a part (Orford, 1992).

This careful balance may be achieved by using qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and participant observation, to explore how young people who share a particular experience make sense of social support within a context that is meaningful to them. The focus should be on local and detailed accounts from a small sample of participants. This would address an area that remains largely unexplored by research to date, and could inform interventions and practices aimed at improving the support that young people receive from significant individuals, groups and settings in their lives.

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CHAPTER THREE

ADOLESCENT GIRLS' UNDERSTANDINGS AND EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT WITHIN THEIR FRIENDSHIP GROUP

ADOLESCENT GIRLS' UNDERSTANDINGS AND EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT WITHIN THEIR FRIENDSHIP GROUP

Abstract

Five adolescent girls from the same friendship group participated in semi-structured interviews exploring their lived experience of social support. Additional contextual information was provided by participant observation in the school setting.

The interviews were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) which yielded three superordinate themes: being there, group belonging, and influence of context. Providing support was experienced as a reciprocal process in which the adolescents shared supportive interactions throughout the day in the context of a friendship group which offered a sense of being connected to others.

Superordinate and subordinate themes were described and discussed in relation to the research questions and extant literature. Findings from this exploratory study can be used to inform future larger scale studies, quantitative research and theoretical conceptualisations of social support.

Implications for practice focus on facilitating and enhancing naturally occurring friendship groups within school

ADOLESCENT GIRLS' UNDERSTANDINGS AND EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT WITHIN THEIR FRIENDSHIP GROUP

1. Introduction

Social support offered by parents, peers and teachers plays an important role in the emotional and psychological well-being of children and young people (e.g. Department of Health, 2008; Green *et al.*, 2005). In the context of growing concerns over the mental health of children and adolescents in the United Kingdom (e.g. UNICEF, 2007) and recognition of the importance of adopting an ecological approach to addressing these concerns (e.g. Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008), promoting social support within significant relationships and environments for children and young people has never been more pertinent.

This study focuses on the social support experiences of adolescent girls. It is argued that adolescents have a special need for social support to help them navigate the many changes and transitions that characterise this period of development (e.g. Cotterell, 2007). In order that theory and research on social support is used to inform intervention and practice by those working with adolescents, definitions of the phenomenon must be as detailed and contextualised as possible (e.g. Stewart, 2000). Thus, the present study is concerned with using rich, qualitative data, derived from the perspectives of adolescents, in order to arrive at detailed context-specific definitions of social support that reflect the meaning of the phenomenon for the participants and hold utility for practitioners.

1.1 Social support literature

Complicating our understanding of social support experiences in adolescence is that *social support* is a complex phenomenon that is hard to clarify (Hupcey, 1998). House *et al.* (1988) argued that '*social support* and related terms such as *social networks* and *social integration* are often used interchangeably as general rubrics for a broad range of phenomena' (p.294). As such, Barrera (1986) advocated abandoning global references to social support in favour of more specific terminology. However, over two decades on, there remains little consensus on how social support should be defined, and contemporary researchers (e.g. Williams *et al.*, 2004) continue to criticise the generalised or global nature of definitions, which hold little utility amongst policy makers and practitioners in a position to identify and meet the support needs of children and young people.

Much of the research on social support has been dominated by traditional research design and a deductive approach to examining the 'main effect' hypothesis, which states that social support is directly helpful in all circumstances, and the 'stress buffering' hypothesis, which states that social support is particularly effective as a buffer during times of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Researchers have generally derived quantitative data from questionnaires using fixed choice categories or a Likert-type format. Despite inconsistent findings, this body of research shows that social support is linked to various positive outcomes for children and young people (e.g. emotional well-being, academic achievement, lower levels of substance use) and sheds some light on the mechanisms through which individuals come to benefit from it.

There is a dearth of qualitative research which permits a richer understanding of the ways in which young people make sense of their experiences of social support within the contexts that hold significance for them. Where a qualitative and inductive approach has been adopted in recent studies, findings have contributed important insights into adolescents' lived experiences of social support, capturing the nature and complexity of social support for children and young people in the themes and categories generated from rich and detailed participant accounts (e.g. Logsdon *et al.*, 2005; Woodgate, 2006).

1.2 Context of adolescent development

Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlighted the importance of the environment, in the widest sense, to human development. For children and young people, the context of development is not just the family, but the geographical, historical, social and political setting in which the family is living (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Children and young people influence, and are influenced by, the multiple systems of which they are a part, including family, school and community. It is important to acknowledge this reciprocal influence and the implication it holds for viewing the adolescent as an 'active agent' in shaping his or her own world (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Within this framework, social support can be viewed as a key resource to human development and well-being that lies at the interface between the individual and the social systems of which he or she is a part (Orford, 1992).

Developmental psychologists have consistently demonstrated that close and intimate friendships are linked to positive developmental outcomes, while social isolation and rejection are linked to poor outcomes. Hartup's (1996) work, for

example, presents friendship as providing important cognitive and social resources on an everyday basis. That is, close friendships provide a context in which adolescents learn to negotiate and solve problems, and are associated with higher levels of social and emotional adjustment and cognitive maturation.

Although friendships in adolescence would seem to be developmentally significant, the literature also highlights the problematic nature of adolescent cliques and friendship groups. Studies have demonstrated that cliques contribute to intergroup biases and exacerbate young people's insecurity about their social position and acceptance, leading to the exclusion and victimisation of certain peers. In their study on pre-adolescent cliques, Adler and Adler (1995) found that clique members joined together in disparaging outsiders but also victimised lower status peers within the clique in order to enhance their own position in the hierarchy. Cliques were plagued by shifting processes of inclusion and exclusion and battles over power and status:

'Individuals go through a cycle of being drawn into the group, cut off from outside friends, placed in positions of subservience, and kept there by the concerted status striving of others' (p.159).

Elsewhere, researchers have emphasised the advantages of having close friendships that are embedded within a larger group context rather than occurring in isolation. Benenson and Christakos (2003), for example, argue that groups moderate the escalation of conflicts by providing third-party mediators, allies, and alternate partners, as well as eliciting loyalty to a larger organisation. They also help diffuse negative emotional responses to the social comparisons that occur between individuals in dyadic relationships by providing additional individuals with whom more favourable comparisons may be drawn (Benenson & Christakos, 2003).

1.3 Girls' friendships

In recent years there has been an explosion of popular, professional and academic interest in girlhood and girls' friendships (Gonick, 2004). Writing from a feminist perspective, Aapola and colleagues (2005) argue that a 'problem' or 'crisis' discourse of female friendship has emerged which tends to emphasise conflicts, power struggles and exclusions within relationships between girls. They argue that this discourse can be found in several studies which have focused on the negative social consequences of indirect forms of aggression and which suggest that girls' high expectations regarding friendships – high levels of intimacy, loyalty and dependence – make their friendships more vulnerable and more prone to relational aggression, such as social exclusion, gossiping and manipulation.

In their qualitative study about difficulties in current and past same-sex relationships, Benenson and Christakos (2003) concluded that there are unique difficulties inherent in girls' friendships which make their same-sex friendships more fragile than those of males. Findings revealed that females' current friendships were of a shorter duration, females were more distressed than males when imagining the potential termination of their friendship, and females had more former friendships that had ended than had males. Benenson and Christakos (2003) hypothesise that the greater intimacy of females' versus males' friendships may intensify reactions to inevitable conflicts, making them more difficult to resolve.

Girls' supposedly strong emphasis on relationships has even been seen as a potential problem in relation to delinquency, with the assumption that girls join 'gangs' and engage in potentially criminal or risky activities as they are more susceptible to peer pressures (Aapola *et al.*, 2005). Gonick (2004) argues that girls' friendships are

presented as almost cult-like organisations that separate children from their families and their parents' influence.

While there are challenges to these simplistic characterisations in the form of research which explores the complex processes through which friendships are constructed and maintained (George, 2007), there remains a tendency in the media and academic literature to stereotype and problematise girl's friendships, presenting them as risk factors in the lives of young women and rarely as positive resources which provide many forms of social support in various contexts (Aopola *et al.*, 2005).

1.4 Rationale for the present study

Although the research literature on social support in childhood and adolescence is extensive, there is a paucity of studies which focus on obtaining detailed and rich information about social support by giving voice to adolescents and their experiences. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to the social support resources residing in groups, communities or settings, reflecting a general tendency in the literature to individualise social support (Orford, 1992, 2008). This is all the more surprising given the established importance of friendship groups in the lives of adolescents (e.g. Erwin, 1998).

Such gaps within the existing literature give grounds for employing a qualitative approach to research that captures detailed accounts of young people's experiences of social support, and pays particular attention to the contexts in which these experiences occur. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to explore, using a phenomenological methodology, adolescent girls' perceptions and lived experiences of social support within the context of their friendship group.

1.5 Research questions

The present study was guided by the following research questions:

- (a) How do adolescent girls understand and experience social support within their friendship group?
- (b) In what contexts do experiences of social support take place during the school day?
- (c) In what contexts do experiences of social support take place outside the school day?

2. Method

2.1 Design

A belief shared by many in community psychology is that the kind of knowledge needed for practice in the field is likely to come from hearing directly from people about the reality of their lives (e.g. Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). In keeping with this, semi-structured interviews were used as the main method of gathering information which was analysed according to the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996; Smith *et al.*, 2009). Participants were also invited to complete diaries about their friendship experiences to encourage reflection on times when they have needed support from their friends. Participant observation was conducted to provide additional contextual information. According to Orford (2008), such qualitative methods are ideally suited to countering the neglect of context. Their use reflects a primary concern of the current study to ensure that the influences of the local context were not stripped away, but were taken into account (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

2.2 Rationale for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology

IPA is a relatively new qualitative methodology developed specifically within psychology. It is derived from phenomenology which is both a philosophy and a research method. IPA has a number of important facets which are in keeping with the aims of the present study.

Phenomenologists believe that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday world and the aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible social and psychological phenomena, refraining from any pre-given theory, deduction or assumption (Groenewald, 2004).

Phenomenologists do not ask whether participants' accounts of what happened to them may be 'true' or 'false'; the search for meaning in accounts surpasses any objective truth or reality (Reid *et al.*, 2005).

IPA explicitly acknowledges that direct access to the personal meaning offered by the participants is not possible due to the researcher's central role in research and analysis. The 'double hermeneutic' recognises that researchers interpret through their own conceptual and perceptual lens the interpretations made by those being studied (Scott, 1996). IPA researchers are encouraged to reflect upon the values, experiences, interests, preconceptions and assumptions they bring to the research process in recognition of the impossibility of remaining 'outside' of one's subject matter (Willig, 2008). Such reflexivity helps to ensure the accessibility and clarity of IPA (e.g. Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

2.3 Participants

IPA methodology typically involves small, homogenous samples, purposively selected because they share the experience of a particular situation, event or condition (Willig, 2008).

Participants in the current study were five adolescent girls, aged 14 years, who were part of the same friendship group in a community comprehensive school for girls. The school is in an urban location and attracts pupils from a wide area. At the time of the study, there were 583 pupils on roll. 23.3 per cent of the pupil population were eligible for free school meals (FSM) and 28.2 per cent were identified as having English as an additional language (EAL). Table 1 shows the ethnic breakdown of the pupil population. Over two-thirds of pupils were from minority ethnic groups. Two of the participants were Black Caribbean, two were White British and one participant was Asian Other.

Table 1. Percentage of pupil population by ethnic group

Ethnicity	Percentage
Black African	10.0
Black Caribbean	23.0
Black Other	5.0
Bangladeshi	1.2
Chinese	1.9
Indian	4.8
Pakistani	8.9
Asian Other	1.9
Mixed Race	10.5
White British	23.3
White Other	3.4

Other	5.1
Not Known	1.0

Homogeneity is not claimed in terms of sample characteristics, but rather in terms of participants' shared experience, which is important for an IPA study. The participants were part of the same friendship group within the same form and year group, at the same school. The rationale for choosing participants within the same friendship group was two-fold. First, it offered a way of viewing social support as a characteristic not of individuals but of groups, communities or settings, in line with Orford's (2008) suggestion. Second, it enabled access to a richer, shared understanding of social support through combining multiple perspectives of the phenomenon.

In order to recruit participants for the study, a senior member of staff was asked to identify a Year 9 form containing groups of friends who might be willing to participate in the research. It was reasoned that pupils in Year 9 had been in school long enough to establish friendships, would have the necessary maturity to reflect on their friendships and the ability to offer detailed accounts of their experiences and perceptions. A sociometric assessment was conducted with pupils to identify friendship groups. Pupils were provided with a proforma on which they were asked to list the names of their best friends in school. Only six girls within the form group reciprocally nominated each other as friends. These girls were invited to take part in the research and five of the six participated in the study.

2.4 Ethics

This study followed the research ethics protocol developed by the Ethics Committee at the University of Birmingham. This required full consideration of ethical principles including, consent, withdrawal, confidentiality and detrimental effects. See Appendix 1 for a copy of submitted ethics form EC2, which details the actions taken to demonstrate their consideration.

2.5 Procedure

Individual interviews, ranging in duration from approximately 40 minutes to one hour were conducted in a quiet and private room in school. Times of the interviews were negotiated with school staff and participants to cause minimum disruption to their school timetable. All interviews were audio-taped, with the participants' permission, and transcribed verbatim.

Following the interviews, participants were invited to keep diary entries of their friendship experiences over the course of two weeks. Participant observation was scheduled to take place after the interviews so that it could be carried out in school contexts identified by the adolescents as significant sites for their experiences of social support.

2.6 Interview schedule

Semi-structured interviews are considered the exemplary method for IPA because they provide a flexible way of collecting data about how participants perceive and make sense of things which are happening to them (Smith & Osborn, 2003). They are easily managed; enable rapport to be developed; allow participants to think,

speak and be heard; and are well suited to in-depth and personal discussion (Reid *et al.*, 2005).

In keeping with the main research aims of the study, a semi-structured interview schedule was designed to elicit experiences (e.g. 'What are your best experiences of being in your friendship group?'), understandings (e.g. 'What do you get from knowing each other?'), and contextual information (e.g. 'When do you have contact with your friends in a typical school day?'). See Appendix 4 for a copy of the full interview schedule.

Development of the schedule was informed by established conventions for semi-structured interviews (e.g. Smith & Osborn, 2003; Willig, 2008). The schedule consisted of a small number of open-ended questions in order to facilitate the adolescents' ability to tell their own stories in their own words. Due to the age of the participants, subsidiary prompts and concrete cues (e.g. school map and timelines) were used to support them in giving full responses. The schedule was used flexibly in that initial questions were modified in the light of participants' responses and the researcher was able to probe interesting areas that arose (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The interview schedule was reviewed by two colleagues and amended for clarity accordingly.

2.7 Participant observation

Smith *et al.* (2009) note that participant observation can provide additional information to help contextualise interview material in IPA studies. The method is also consistent with community psychology's emphasis on 'person-in-context' (Orford, 1992).

Participant observation typically aims to understand the social world from the participants' point of view. It allows the researcher to get alongside participants in their everyday settings; capturing their experiences in an ecologically appropriate way, where they are not separated from their context (Greene & Hogan, 2005). In the current study, participant observation was deemed important for understanding the context in which social support experiences take place for participants, in order to help the researcher make sense of what participants have talked about in their interview accounts. Furthermore, providing a detailed portrait of the setting, through conducting observation, adds to the transparency of the analysis, which allows others to judge the transferability of the findings.

The observation took place in the participants' form room, a site that had been identified in the interviews as significant to their experiences of social support during the school day. The researcher sat with the adolescents during their break time on one day. They were observed engaging, as naturally as possible, in the types of activities that formed a typical part of their everyday lives.

Willig (2008) suggests that the researcher needs to maintain a balance between participation and observation; that is, 'be involved enough to understand what is going on, yet remain detached enough to be able to reflect on the phenomenon under investigation' (p.27). Clarity was sought from participants from time to time, but on the whole the researcher adopted the role of 'observer' over that of 'participant'.

In following guidance from Robson (2002), the researcher made brief notes during the observation, pertaining to the details of the setting and the subjective reactions to what had been observed (see Appendix 5 for a summary). Data were used to supplement emerging themes from the interviews in order to provide a fuller

understanding of an important context relevant to the adolescents' experiences of social support.

2.8 Diaries

Willig (2008) suggests that in phenomenological research, participants can be asked to produce accounts of their experiences through alternative means to interviews, such as diaries. Such contemporaneous note taking, conducted in private rather than in public, may provide information that participants do not talk about in their interviews. Diaries were chosen as an additional method of data collection in order to provide participants with the opportunity to reflect upon their social support experiences in their own time and following questioning at interview which might act as a stimulus. In this way the phenomenon under investigation can be accessed at more than one time-point and from the reflective efforts of participants, in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of social support (Smith *et al.*, 2009).

Participants were invited to make brief diary entries about their friendship experiences over a two-week period. They were asked to: 'Record a time today when you've needed support from your friends'. The following prompts were provided to guide participants in their diary-keeping: 'what happened; how did you feel; what difference did your friends make?'

It was not the intention to subject the diary entries to detailed analysis, but rather to 'triangulate' data from the diaries with data from the interviews to elucidate any areas of convergence or divergence and to illuminate the 'keyness' of any themes that may emerge in both data sets.

2.9 Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using IPA according to the method outlined by Smith and colleagues (2009). The basic process in IPA is the move from the descriptive to the interpretative, with the final aim of developing an account which makes sense of the meaning participants make of their lived experience. See Appendix 6 for an example of an annotated transcript.

Table 2 outlines the initial stages of the analytic process which involved detailed analysis of individual transcripts before moving on to look for commonalities across cases (Willig, 2008).

Table 2. Initial stages of IPA (from Smith *et al.*, 2009)

Stage	Description of analysis
Reading and re-reading the transcript	Close line-by-line reading of the transcript to become familiar with the interview content.
Initial noting	Initial notes were made in the right hand margin of the transcript including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • descriptive comments on significant or interesting things the participant was saying; • comments on the participant's specific use of language; • connections between different aspects of the transcript and; • conceptual comments and questions about how the participant understands the phenomenon of social support.
Developing emergent themes	The transcript and initial notes were re-examined to identify themes as they emerged chronologically through the participant's account. Initial comments were rephrased into concise, interpretative

	phrases, capturing what had been found in the text, while drawing upon knowledge and theory from psychology and the social support literature. These themes were recorded in the left hand margin of the transcript.
Searching for connections across emergent themes	Emergent themes were mapped out on post-its to explore possible connections between them. Themes were arranged into clusters which were labelled as superordinate themes.

Once each transcript had been analysed, a table was created to provide the researcher with an overview of the superordinate and subordinate themes emerging from the participant accounts (see Appendix 7). The table was searched for shared themes across cases and for distinctive variations on those themes to preserve individuality. The links between these themes and the raw data were checked through a final re-reading of original transcripts to ensure that interpretations were grounded in participants' accounts.

Credibility checks are a key way of ensuring the rigour of qualitative research (e.g. Barker & Pistrang, 2005). The interpretative process was checked by a colleague familiar with IPA in order to ensure that it could be followed from the raw data to superordinate themes. This was a joint activity which involved sitting together to re-examine the themes that had emerged from the interview data and to discuss difficulties or uncertainties that the researcher had experienced in trying to arrive at a coherent and meaningful interpretation. While it is acknowledged that any one analysis can only be presented as a tentative statement with numerous possible alternative interpretations, the credibility check was valuable to the researcher as an alternative way of reflecting on and making sense of the data rather than as a way of

trying to reach agreement over the 'truest' account of participants' understandings and experiences of social support.

Participants were invited to comment on the interpretations made by the researcher, via a face-to-face group meeting (see Appendix 8). Participant validation has dual roots in a phenomenological epistemology and in a commitment to seeking more democratic research practices (Smith, 1997). Soliciting participants' views of the analysis is also consistent with community psychology's value on collaborative relationships between researchers and participants (Barker & Pistrang, 2005). Although it is acknowledged that this process may not provide corroboration, as a power imbalance may lead participants simply to agree with the researcher's conclusions, Barker and Pistrang (2005) suggest that it may prove fruitful in expanding the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon. As such, the participants' comments were taken into account in the final checking and reporting of themes.

The themes are discussed below and illustrated with verbatim quotes from the interviews. This allows the voices of the adolescents to be heard and helps the reader to trace the analytic process (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). The names of participants, and any references to identifiable information, have been changed in order to maintain anonymity.

3. Findings

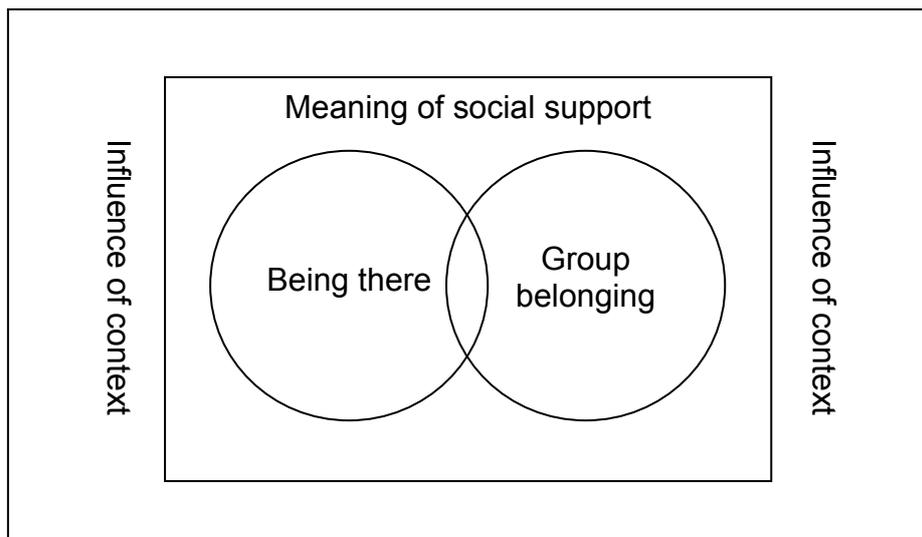
Three themes emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts: *being there*, *group belonging* and *influence of context*. These are summarised with their related subthemes in Table 3. Themes were selected not solely on the basis of prevalence;

factors such as the richness and eloquence of particular accounts were also taken into consideration. Although themes are presented separately, a full understanding of each theme can only be achieved through an appreciation of the connections between them (see Figure 1).

Table 3. Overview of emerging themes and subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
1. Being there	Fulfilling the need to talk
	Engaging in social activity
	Offering practical support
2. Group belonging	Sharing interests
	Social identity
	Social acceptance / validation
3. Influence of context	School environment
	Community environment

Figure 1. A pictorial representation of themes



3.1 Being there

'Being there' emerged as a powerful theme which seemed to capture the meaning of social support for the participants. Initially an emergent theme present in all the participants' accounts, it acquired a superordinate status as its meaning was further elucidated through the related themes of 'fulfilling the need to talk', 'engaging in social activity' and 'offering practical support'.

'Being there' is interpreted as the need for the constant presence of similar others with whom to share the school experience. It is contrasted with 'being alone'. Evidence that this interpretation is grounded in the participants' accounts is best provided by the following quotations:

<i>Shantelle:</i>	Like somebody that's always there for you and somebody that's kind of like you.
<i>Shantelle:</i>	Having friends that are like you, you don't feel so alone.

3.1.1 Fulfilling the need to talk

The subtheme of 'fulfilling the need to talk' emerged for four of the five participants. The provision of emotional support through talking is emphasised by some of the participants' references to sharing feelings and secrets, and offering comfort and reassurance:

<i>Riz:</i>	I don't get bored. Like, I have someone to talk to. And they're just there all the time so like if I'm upset or something we can talk and they just cheer me up.
<i>Josie:</i>	If anyone's upset we're always there for them . . . Sitting with them, comforting them, making them laugh. Always looking out for each other. Maybe when someone's got a problem and they need to talk, we'll say "It'll sort itself out, don't worry about it, it's nothing to worry about".

Josie uses social comparison to highlight the link between having someone to talk to and the importance of mutual trust:

<i>Josie:</i>	I mean with them you can talk, you can talk to them about anything. They won't laugh, they won't do anything. But when I was with this other group, it'll go round, it'll spread. I can talk to them about secrets or something deep. I mean Chloe and the others know everything about each other, don't think there's nothing that we don't know.
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Talk is not always about fulfilling a need for emotional support, but rather it reflects the desire for social companionship throughout the school day:

<i>Shantelle:</i>	Because I just I always need somebody to talk to, I'm really [pause] like people say "can you stop talking for like five minutes?" and I just can't and they'll be like "I bet you can't stop talking for five seconds" and I can't because words well up in my head and conversations and I just need to get it out. If I didn't have anybody to talk to it'd be really awkward because I'd need to find somebody to talk to.
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The participants often minimised the significance of the content of their talk, indicating that in the most part, although it fulfilled an important need, the content of communication was often incidental and light-hearted. They used phrases such as 'just talk' about 'anything and everything', 'stupid stuff' and 'nothing really'.

3.1.2 Engaging in social activity

This sub-theme emerged for four of the five participants, but there was variation in its prevalence across accounts, with some participants more than others making spontaneous reference to it. For example, the desire to socialise and 'have fun together' emerged strongly from Jade's account, as a way of avoiding boredom and loneliness:

<i>Jade:</i>	Boring and [pause] just feel lonely if they weren't there. Wouldn't have anything to do or go out places all the time. Just stay in the house and be bored.
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Jade also talked about how the group uses social activity as a distraction from their worries and problems:

Jade: And [pause] if we have problems we try to make each other feel better. . . .We're just there for them. Just try to make them stop thinking about it. . . . Probably go to the cinema or umm just do something.

For Chloe, group membership has served a socialisation role by facilitating new social experiences which have resulted in enhanced social networks:

Chloe: I think going out is more important to like get around. You can meet people and all make new friends. I think I get more support from them being there. It makes me more open, [pause] not open, not as shy.

Engaging in social activity is not given as much weight in the other participants' accounts:

Riz: We go out, we don't always go over each other's house and stuff like that, but we do like sometimes for somebody's birthday, we'd go out to cinema or eat or something.

However, Riz's casual reference to spending time at each other's houses gains greater significance through Shantelle's account which contains a number of references to this particular social activity. For example, Shantelle seems to define 'group' in terms of the amount of time spent together outside of school:

Shantelle: I'd say, me, Jade, Noreen, Riz are more of a group of friends, and Chloe and Josie are more just like two because I think they spend more time at each others' houses and stuff.

Such comments raise the question of whether the adolescents are missing out on a socially supportive activity that may strengthen the bond of their school-based friendship.

3.1.3 Offering practical support

This sub-theme emerged for three of the five participants. In comparison with the other sub-themes of 'being there' it did not feature as prevalently or as richly in participants' accounts, but nonetheless it was referred to spontaneously by participants in talking about the meaning of a true friend or the nature of the support they receive from their friendship group. As such, it contributes to our understanding of what social support means to these participants, as their comments reflect typical activities of adolescent girls:

<i>Shantelle:</i>	Somebody that will help you or lend you something if you need it, or is just always there for you.
<i>Chloe:</i>	They're there to help with your homework.
<i>Josie:</i>	Like if I go to someone's house and we're like doing make-up to go out, they'll say like "Why don't you use mine? Do it my way?" So, silly things that you don't really notice.

3.2 Group belonging

'Group belonging' brings together the related themes of 'sharing interests', 'social identity' and 'social acceptance / validation', and shows how the adolescents' social support experiences are influenced by group processes. A sense of being connected to others in the friendship group was richly illustrated in participants' accounts.

3.2.1 Sharing interests

All of the participants talked about sharing interests. This subtheme is concerned with the formation of friendship, through discovering commonalities and wanting to share these with one another:

Jade: We kind of know who's good at what talents. All different things we're interested in. And then we get interest too.

It also captures the effects of social influence and how the friendship group creates self-change in individuals:

Josie: I think I've changed an awful lot. I mean before I didn't really want to know anyone, just be with my friends and that's it. But now I'm not like that. I want to get to know more, I want to see what everyone likes, the things they're into. Because they're like that so when they're like that, you tend to think what they're doing, I'll do.

Shantelle: I think sometimes they like bring the best out in you. Like umm *[pause]* I don't know, you find you like stuff that you probably never thought you'd like before like certain books . . . Just to try new things.

Other participants also talk about the positive influence that the friendship group has had on their engagement with school-related activities, for example:

Riz: I never used to do like *[pause]*, when we got homework, I never used to do it cos I didn't see the point of it and all of them would do it all the time and I'd never do it and then they would all like tell me to do it so now I'm starting to do my homework a lot now, not a lot, but more. Things that I never used to do, I do now.

3.2.2 Social identity

This sub-theme emerged for three of the five participants and featured richly in accounts, helping to illuminate the unique nature of social support at the group level.

A group identity has been established through social comparisons with other friendship groups in school:

Shantelle: Like that's what our form's kind of divided into sections *[pause]*. There's kind of some people who are say naughty, there are some people who are really loud and just mess about, and then there's like two who are just quiet and a bit in the corner and then there's just us, and then there's some new girls.

Shantelle describes their friendship group as 'the normal ones', 'calm and collected', 'observant of the rest' and preferring to stay 'out of it'. Outsiders are positioned as 'different' and implicit references are made to ingroup / outgroup perceptions:

Shantelle: If you're already in like a select group its hard to bring somebody else in cos you don't know if you're going to get on will them, you don't know if they're going to like want to be friends with other people and they'll have to be friends with you.

Within-group homogeneity is viewed as socially supportive. Josie's comments show how belonging to a community of similar others enables them to avoid the arguments that are a feature of other groups:

Josie: In our form I definitely think we're the strongest group cos you get other groups and they'll always be arguing, they'll always be saying stuff to each other, so you're not really in the group then if you can do that. I just think that we're really good [pause] I think that cos we all like doing the same things, we're all like basically the same, helps us to get on.

Maintaining harmonious relationships within the friendship group appears to be a priority for the participants. This may be because the participants are keen to avoid the adverse emotional impact of falling out with friends, or because arguments within the group would detract from their focus on school engagement and achievement:

Josie: I think our group now is exactly what friendship should be like. It shouldn't be any arguing, it should just be school life and everything like that, and that's what it is.

The accounts indicate that the girls have developed a common ideology of what friendship should be. Established social norms and values are communicated and reinforced within the context of the friendship group:

Jade: We all keep secrets.

Shantelle: We don't like, I've heard other people say it as well, we don't talk about each other, like there's a group of girls they'll sit there and they'll be like "tell me who you like best in the group" and you don't do that cos obviously if you're all friends you're not going to say "I hate you" and you're part of a group, and they just like chucked out these two girls out of the group who just sit in the corner now.

Josie: We've never talked about each other behind our backs. . .

The group's construction of what it means to be a good friend to one another is based on the social provision of mutual trust. The group is a place of trust for sharing secrets and for providing a sense of security in the fickle context of school where hurtful gossip is a part of everyday life and where friends routinely betray confidences:

Shantelle: It's just weird to see how you could say two-faced they are to one person and then they go over to the next group and talk about the person that they're friends with and it's really horrible to be honest.

3.2.3 Social acceptance / validation

This subtheme emerged for three of the five participants. The group's social identity provides a basis for mutual approval and a source of reciprocal validation of one another's developing self-concept:

Josie: I had an operation in April on my foot. And I remember that Chloe was there, always, just always there, generally, "Do you want to do this, do you want to do that, anything you want to do?" And the rest were just the same, always checking on me. I had a week off school and then I came to school and they were all like "Oh, are you alright, what happened?" Exactly what friends are for, how you need to be a friend to people, and that's exactly how they were to me. It made me want to come to school so I can come to school and be who I want to be.

Here, and elsewhere in participants' accounts, there is an overlap with the theme of 'being there', demonstrating that themes are best understood in relation to one another and the connections between them:

Shantelle: Somebody that's always there for you and somebody that's kind of like you and that doesn't care if you have money or if you don't have money or if you're not from the same background.

The importance of being accepted and valued by others in the group is further elaborated by Shantelle:

Shantelle: Like sometimes in school you get people that do something that's really stupid, like really stupid, and people just think they're disgusting and then they'll just ditch them and leave them there and I've actually like seen that with somebody in my class. And like if they're a true friend they wouldn't care what you've done because they know you for your personality and they don't care what you've done on the outside but what you're like on the inside.

While similarity, connectedness and agreement are important elements of common group identity, group members also highlight the importance of being able to maintain their individuality:

Jade: I just feel better having friends like them. *[pause]* Like you can be yourself around them cos they know you and you know they want to be your friend. *[pause]* You can be yourself and don't worry about it.

Josie: Like I used to be friends with these other girls and they were just always insulting you if you wasn't what they were like. It was you can't have your own opinion, it's theirs or nowhere.

Importantly, social acceptance / validation provided by the group can serve to cushion or protect members from stresses in the school environment. Shantelle talks about how the friendship group helps her to resist social pressures from the broader peer group:

Shantelle: Maybe like in lessons. You're trying to like get your point across or something and they'll like help you out or *[pause]* just because like they're there. Sometimes you're in a group of people and you'll like conform so because they're mean you'll be mean or because they're really shy and quiet you'll be shy and quiet. Having friends that are like you, you don't feel so alone.

3.3 Influence of context

In their accounts of places in which they spend time together as a group, all the participants talked about how these contexts shape their experiences of social support in some way. The influence of context is discussed under the subthemes of 'school environment' and 'community environment'.

3.3.1 School environment

This sub-theme emerged for four of the five participants. The effect of ability grouping in core subjects appears to have the greatest influence on the participants' experiences of social support. It not only affects the frequency of their contact during the school day but also changes the nature of friendships formed in primary school:

Shantelle: In Year 7 I came to school with one person that was Chloe and we were very close actually, yeah. But I don't know, like in primary school you have all the lessons with everybody so when they started putting you in like different groups and I just got closer to Riz, because at first we didn't like each other at all.

Within these lessons, many teachers choose to use seating plans which restricts the opportunity for free discussion among friends:

Chloe: [In lessons] cos we have like a seating plan, I think we like have a conversation but we get on with our work as well.

Shantelle recounts an example of how regular contact, as a result of the use of classroom seating plans, led to the formation of friendship:

Shantelle: We didn't really talk to each other but then obviously cos we had to sit next to each other and most of the time we had to work together, we just found things that we liked.

Another feature of the school system which may serve to promote or hinder social support benefits offered by peers emerges in Riz's account. School rules stipulate

that at break and lunch time pupils can use their own form rooms for socialising but are not allowed into other form rooms. This has the effect of creating self-contained groups of friends who do not tend to mix socially with pupils outside of their form:

<i>Riz:</i>	We're usually in our form a lot. We don't really mingle a lot. We don't go to other forms. . . We're not allowed to be in their form room but we could go out or go to the canteen or something together. Because yeah we um we're together in most of the lessons, so us girls like we know each other more, and like other forms stay together more as well and know each other more.
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For the participants, the physical environment of the school further compounds this:

<i>Riz:</i>	Our form room is the furthest away; it's like all the way up in English and it's like by itself, by the Year 11s. It's like nobody can be bothered to go to the other groups.
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Participant observation helped to elucidate the reality described by the participants. The adolescents' form room was quite isolated in its position on the second floor in the far west corner of the school. Within the form room, the various friendship groups (totalling four) were clearly identifiable due to their spatial locations with the classroom. The participants chose to stand or sit clustered in their friendship group, with space between themselves and other groups.

3.3.2 Community environment

'Community environment' emerged as a subtheme in four of the five participants' accounts. Community environment influences the participants' relationships with one another through its effect on the physical proximity, or distance, between their homes:

Shantelle: We don't really keep in touch outside of school. Like you'd think that we weren't really that close but we are. But it's more like a school friendship, whereas other people go to each other's houses.

Josie: I think the distance is a big problem I suppose. If they all lived local it would be a lot easier. Probably we don't meet up as much as we'd like.

The community environment appears to impact upon the nature but not the frequency of contact between the participants, as they make use of electronic means of keeping in touch, such as email and social networking sites:

Riz: Like after school, we text and phone. Sometimes we go on the internet, like Facebook and MSN, but I prefer Facebook more. Just like, "what are you up to?", "how are you?", "are you going to watch whatever programme today?" Sometimes we discuss any homework that we've got to do.

4. Discussion

4.1 Key findings

The main aim of the present study was to use a phenomenological approach to gain a better understanding of adolescent girls' experiences and perceptions of social support within their friendship group. In redressing the relative neglect of context in the social support literature, the study also aimed to illuminate the specific contexts in which the adolescents' experiences of social support occur in and out of school.

This research provides an original insight into the nature of social support at the group level, by using naturally occurring 'triangulation' to explore shared experiences and understandings of the phenomenon among a group of friends.

Key findings are discussed under the research questions.

4.1.1 How do adolescent girls understand and experience social support within their friendship group?

Two central themes, 'being there' and 'group belonging', emerged from interview transcripts and best captured the meaning of social support for participants in this study. The girls' accounts of their friendship group experiences were invariably positive, which contrasts with the negative view of adolescent peer relationships typically presented in the friendship literature (e.g. Gonick, 2004). The highly supportive nature of these girls' relationships may be explained by the full set of reciprocated nominations revealed by the sociometric questionnaire. Other girls within the same form did not present as a clearly defined friendship group with reciprocal nominations, hinting at possible factions and disagreements which may have provided a more negative, or less cohesive, account of social support. However, in revealing and highlighting the strengths and resources residing within this group of adolescent girls, this study is differentially positioned to the extant literature and thus makes claims to an original contribution to knowledge.

The theme 'being there' meant that the adolescents were constantly 'present' and willing to provide support when needed. This was linked with the importance of 'being alike' and contrasted with 'being alone', highlighting the adolescents' need for the companionship of similar others with whom to share and navigate the social world of school. In a recent study of the available support for children following parental separation, Halpenny and colleagues (2008) found that participants valued opportunities for sharing experiences with peers who were living in similar contexts:

'Some children simply found it helpful to know that there were others who shared the experience of parental separation, as this reassured them that they

were not isolated or alone, and that they were not different from everybody else' (Halpenny *et al.*, 2008, p.318).

The theme 'being there' emerged from Woodgate's (2006) qualitative study of the perspectives of social support by adolescents with cancer. Knowing that others were there for them was very important to the adolescents as it made them feel that 'they were not alone in having to get through the cancer experience' (Woodgate, 2006, p.126). In particular, the physical presence of others and their efforts to help the adolescents feel better was most valued as it reduced their sense of isolation. In comparing the findings of the present study with those from previous research on social support, it is suggested that the phenomenon of 'being there' may be valuable to adolescents in their everyday lives, not just in crisis situations.

Within the subthemes of 'fulfilling the need to talk' and 'engaging in social activity', the adolescent girls described using talk or social activities to offer companionship and comfort, and to distract one another from worries and problems.

According to Erwin (1998), adolescents report spending more time simply talking to friends than any other activity. The participants' talk involved some self-disclosure of emotions. This is in keeping with findings from other studies of social support that children and young people highlight the benefits of communicating their feelings to others (e.g. Beam *et al.*, 2002; Halpenny *et al.*, 2008). However, participants in the present study tended to minimise the significance of the content of their frequent talk with one another. Cotterell (2007), in writing about adolescents' social networks, suggests that the importance of the talk lies in strengthening social bonds and cohesion within the group. That is, the topic of talk is irrelevant to group processes, but rather, the act of being there to 'just talk' in itself serves an important socially

supportive function for the group. This helps to explain the participants' frequent communication via the internet and telephone after school, despite having spent much of the day in each other's company.

Although 'engaging in social activity' emerged as a subtheme in the present study, not all of the participants emphasised the importance of social participation in shared recreation and leisure activities as a form of support provided by their friends. Halpenny *et al.* (2008) found that social activities that offered opportunities for distraction tended to be a feature of the narratives of younger children, not adolescents. Many authors suggest that developmental differences influence the kinds of support identified as important by children and young people, with a tendency for adolescents to highlight the need for emotional support over the need to have fun (e.g. Halpenny *et al.*, 2008; Sanchez *et al.*, 2006). However, engagement in social activity is supportive for participants in the present study because enjoyment arises from the shared nature of the experience, and groups in adolescence develop from a mutual preference for activities, as well as interests and characteristics (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Cotterell, 2007).

'Group belonging', the second central theme to emerge in the study, represents participants' sense of being connected to others in the friendship group and shows how social support provisions at the group level may be unique, or at least different from the benefits gained from dyadic peer relationships.

The friendship group is formed on shared interests, reflecting the similarity-attraction hypothesis: a dominant theory guiding social psychological research on adolescent friendship which states that liking is associated with similarity in one or

more characteristics (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996). Close friendship groups develop by mutual preference for particular characteristics, interests and collaborative activities and usually influence each other in the direction of greater similarity (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). The adolescents talked about how they had encouraged each other to take up activities such as reading, indicating that the tendency to conform to group norms can be more positive than negative (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). However, it is worth noting that in the participants' accounts of other groups, negative influences were also suggested.

According to theories of adolescent development, the processes of self-definition and identity formation are normative developmental tasks in adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents depend heavily on their friendship groups through which they can come to understand themselves and their place in a rapidly expanding social world (Erwin, 1998). Brown (2000) explains that our social identity, our sense of who we are and what we are worth, is intimately bound up with our group memberships. Participants in the present study demonstrated that they had developed a social identity derived from membership of the friendship group, with a clear perception of what defined the 'us' associated with group membership. Group norms, specifying certain rules for how group members should behave, establish a basis for mutual expectations and provide the individual with frames of reference through which the world is interpreted (Brown, 2000). Such norms may help the adolescents to function more effectively within the peer group and wider school context.

This shared social identity leads adolescents to seek ways of positively differentiating their ingroup from a comparison outgroup, in order to increase their self-esteem (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Some participants used social comparisons

with other friendship groups in school to emphasise the positive distinctiveness of their own group, and through this showed that their sense of who they are is defined, to some extent, in terms of 'we' rather than 'I'.

In writing on the topic of group processes, Brown (2000) indicates that reassurance of worth through social validation is a particular social provision supplied by friends as a group. The friendship group in the present study has a positive impact on individuals' self-esteem, enabling the adolescents to feel accepted and valued for 'who they are, no matter what'. Furthermore, social validation from the friendship group may serve a protective role in helping the adolescents to resist pressures to conform emanating from within the broader peer group.

In all, belonging to a friendship group has provided an important socially supportive function for these adolescents through contributing to a positive social identity. The group has constructed a common ideology or vision through which members can develop a strong sense of who they are as a group and as individuals, and norms upon which they can base their self-esteem through mutual approval and validation.

With regard to the theoretical literature, the meaning of social support for adolescents which has emerged in the themes 'being there' and 'group belonging' may contribute insight into the appropriateness or relevance of conventional conceptualisations of social support.

The main-effect model and stress-buffering model are the two main theories about the way in which social support benefits individuals (e.g. Cohen & Wills, 1985). While the main-effect model implies a more continuous role for social support, the buffering

model emphasises social support as a response to times of stress (Williams *et al.*, 2004).

The current findings would seem to offer further support for the main-effect model which is already well-established by quantitative research with adolescent populations (e.g. Benhorin & McMahon, 2008; Bru *et al.*, 2001; Zimmerman *et al.*, 2000). In line with the hypothesis that social support has positive effects on individuals regardless of the level of stress experienced, participants talked about the need for the constant presence of similar others throughout the school day, and the benefits of being part of a group with whom to navigate the highs and lows of normative adolescent experiences. Participants' comments indicated that social support benefited them directly in a number of ways identified in the quantitative research, including increasing their sense of well-being and their engagement in school-related activities.

Participants in the current study did not tend to emphasise negative life events; thus, there was little evidence that social support benefited them differentially depending on their levels of stress. However, some comments alluded to the importance of knowing that friends were willing and able to provide extra support when this was needed, in order to buffer the effects of any particularly stressful experiences.

In summary, the themes of 'being there' and 'group belonging' best capture the way in which adolescent girls in the current study understand and experience social support within their friendship group. These findings reflect established knowledge on adolescent development and group processes, share some commonalities with findings from other qualitative studies (e.g. Woodgate, 2006; Halpenny *et al.*, 2008),

and also show that existing definitions and conceptualisations of social support hold some relevance to the lived experiences of adolescents in the context of a secondary school.

4.1.2 In what contexts do experiences of social support take place during the school day?

Context issues impacting on participants' experiences of social support emerged from their accounts and were grouped under the theme 'influence of context'. Here, comparisons can be drawn with Logsdon *et al.*'s (2005) study of pregnant adolescents' experiences of receiving support. The authors found that support received by participants was influenced by multiple contexts of family composition, socioeconomic status, safety issues and relationships with the baby's father. Although participants in the present study are arguably functioning in less complex contexts, an understanding of the social support experiences of these adolescents is not possible without an appreciation of the school contexts in which they spend much of their time.

The subtheme of 'school environment' described the effect of groupings for learning in the classroom and the wider school on the adolescents' friendship choices and the nature of friendships formed. The fact that classroom organisation (e.g. ability grouping in core subjects and seating plans) lead young people to become acquainted with one another and to form friendships is well documented in the social psychology literature (Baron & Byrne, 2000). It reflects a social phenomenon whereby interactions between individuals tend to become increasingly positive if they are brought into regular contact through physical proximity (Zajonc, 1968, in Erwin,

1998). Thus, opportunities for frequent interaction which potentially impact on experiences of social support are controlled to a great extent by features of school policy, organisation and environment. According to Pellegrini and Blatchford (2000, in Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003), whether classrooms are competitive and grouped by ability versus cooperative and grouped by interest affects whether friends are chosen on the basis of shared ability versus shared interests. Furthermore, the friendship mix within groupings may impact upon learning achieved through group work and discussion in the classroom. Kutnick *et al.* (2005) state that collaborative group working is likely to be enhanced if pupils have a positive relationship among themselves.

Constraints on the adolescents' experiences of social support within the school environment were redoubled by the physical layout of the school. Their form room was located some distance from other Year 9 form rooms, creating a sense of being separate from their peers.

Within the secondary school context, senior managers and subject teachers are encouraged to plan pupil grouping in order to promote learning (e.g. Kutnick *et al.*, 2005). The findings from this study draw our attention to the need for greater awareness and consideration of the influence of the school organisation and environment on social interaction between peers and the importance of creating a climate which promotes social support.

4.1.3 In what contexts do experiences of social support take place outside the school day?

Coleman and Hendry (1999) note that, while adolescents' friendships usually begin in school, time spent together outside of school strengthens the bond between friends. Participants' accounts captured within the theme 'community environment' revealed that opportunities for social support experiences out of school were limited due to the physical distance between the adolescents' homes. Some of the participants lived in different and unfamiliar neighbourhoods and meeting friends outside of school required special effort. Thus, the adolescents socialised together on occasions such as birthdays and the end of school term, but rarely spent time together at one another's houses.

As such, the community context is unable to provide frequent opportunities for social support to supplement those offered by the school context. However, it emerged in participants' accounts that the adolescents create an alternative 'virtual context' for socially supportive interactions through the use of electronic means of communication. They frequently use e-mail and instant messaging from their home computers to maintain contact after school, at the weekends and in the holidays.

Aside from research into the types of social support provided by on-line support groups (e.g. Shapiro & Tichon, 2003), the role of the Internet has received little attention in the existing literature on social support for children and young. This is somewhat surprising given the increasing pervasiveness of the Internet in the lives of adolescents (Gross, 2004).

Findings from the present study are consistent with those from Gross' (2004) study of home Internet usage among a school-based sample of adolescents in California,

USA. Participants described their online social interactions as: occurring in private settings such as email and instant messages; with friends who are also part of their daily offline lives; and devoted to fairly ordinary topics such as friends and gossip.

The current research shows that the Internet provides a viable alternative for fulfilling the support needs of young people who live in different communities or for whom geographic characteristics of home neighbourhoods make it difficult for them to meet (e.g. accessibility, safety). Researchers argue that the Internet should be conceptualised as an important social context for adolescent development in which adolescents participate and co-construct their own virtual social and psychological world (e.g. Gross, 2004; Subrahmanyam & Gloria, 2007). Implications of this, and other findings, are discussed below.

4.2 Implications for practice

The present findings require further confirmation before they can be generalised to other adolescents. However, in combination with other small-scale complementary studies, more confident claims can be made about the implications of the current findings. Furthermore, the author's experience as a trainee educational psychologist working in school contexts provides a broader perspective on which to base recommendations for practice. By providing a detailed portrait of the school setting in the current study, readers are able to judge the applicability of the findings, and the relevance of the following implications, to other settings. With this in mind, it is tentatively suggested that there are a number of possible ways in which the knowledge gleaned from this study may help to guide practitioners in promoting and enhancing socially supportive interactions between peers.

Findings point to the importance of school staff recognising the influence of school systems, policies and the environment on the social support experiences of adolescents. Ways of facilitating and enhancing, rather than constraining or disrupting, these experiences should be considered. Specifically, it might be useful to expand or modify opportunities for social interaction during the school day and after school to ensure that adolescents have adequate space and time to benefit from social support provided by their peers. In addition, teachers could be encouraged to plan and provide support for group interactions in the classroom through regular use of co-operative small group work and collaborative projects. Brown (2000) comments that through bringing groups into contact with one another in conditions that involve co-operation, attitudes towards outgroup members will usually become more positive.

Education professionals should try to capitalise on the social support provided by naturally occurring friendship groups within school. Findings from the present study indicate that, rather than directly intervening in the dynamics of these groups, professionals would be better advised to offer more general input on communication and social skills which may serve to strengthen the bonds within them. As peers are now widely recognised as a potential educational resource (e.g. Cotterell, 2007), peer modelling and coaching could be used as a way of sharing adolescents' knowledge and experience of positive social interactions with those whose friendship group experiences are more negative or problematic.

The study findings also point to the need for practitioners to recognise and harness the positive role of the Internet in helping to establish and maintain socially supportive interactions within adolescents' existing social networks. Pupils could be

provided with web-based learning opportunities which may provide a social environment for increased co-operative relationships.

In illuminating the myriad of ways in which friendship groups can provide support to adolescents, the present study serves to highlight those benefits being missed by adolescents who are socially isolated or excluded within the secondary school environment. The participants' accounts provided a strong sense of the importance of friends 'being there' to share in the highs and lows of school life and to prevent loneliness. Coleman and Hendry (1999) argue that because friendship and acceptance in the peer group are so important during adolescence, those who are isolated or rejected are at a particular disadvantage and thus need special attention from practitioners. Findings from the present study can provide clues as to how the task of promoting positive social support experiences for these young people should be approached.

Firstly, it is unlikely that the social support provisions highlighted in participants' accounts could be supplied by adults or by assigned peer mentors. This is because providing support was a reciprocal process in which the adolescents shared supportive interactions during the school day through the act of 'being there' for one another, and because the friendship group provided an arguably unique context for identity formation through mutual similarity, approval and expectations among group members. Thus, education professionals may be better advised to focus on facilitating naturally occurring supportive relationships between peers, as discussed above.

Secondly, the study findings suggest that preventative efforts are needed at the start of Year 7, or during transition arrangements, before friendship groups become

established at secondary school and the interference of adults, regardless of good intentions, is not welcomed by adolescents. Understanding and sensitive application of the psychological theory of proximity and repeated exposure (Zajonc, 1968, in Erwin, 1998) to increase frequent opportunities for positive interaction between peers may facilitate the natural process of friendship formation and ensure that fewer pupils become socially isolated.

4.3 Limitations

The findings of this study should be considered in the context of some methodological limitations.

First, it is acknowledged that the interpretation presented is bound within the limits of participants' ability to articulate their experiences of social support, as well as their willingness to share information with the researcher in an honest and open way. Willig (2008) states that phenomenological research methods are not suitable for the study of the experiences of participants who may not be able to communicate the rich texture of these to the researcher. However, Elliott *et al.* (2009) argue that this is at odds with one of the main aims of qualitative research, which is to allow participants to present their own perspective upon the phenomenon being studied. With some additional thought and preparation into appropriate ways of eliciting responses from young people, participants in the present study were able to engage thoughtfully in the interviews. In hindsight, participants may have benefited from previewing the interview questions in order to allow them extra time to reflect on the topic under study. Further reflection may have been facilitated through the use of diary-keeping, but, unfortunately, participants did not engage fully with this activity and no additional

data were produced for the study. Using an alternative medium of communication may have proved more successful in securing participants' motivation and commitment to keeping a diary; for example, encouraging instant messaging and live topic board discussions using web-based communication applications with which the adolescents were familiar.

Second, although the period of participant observation provided the researcher with a better understanding of the context in which the participants spent some of their time, it was brief and therefore limited. Furthermore, the extent to which this activity constituted 'participant' observation is open to challenge, but rather the researcher's role may better be conceptualised as 'observer-as-participant' given that contact was brief, formal and openly classified as observation (Burgess, 1984). It is also readily acknowledged that it is difficult to observe adolescents and expect them to continue with their typical activities with little evidence of the influence of the observer (Greene & Hogan, 2005). Thus, it cannot be claimed that this research activity presented any real insight into the nature of the participants' social world or everyday interactions, but it did allow the researcher to learn 'first hand' about a specific context important to their experiences of social support.

In the context of debates about whether traditional criteria used for evaluating quantitative research can, or should, be applied to qualitative research, a number of authors have proposed alternative guidelines for judging qualitative research (e.g. Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992; Elliott *et al.*, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In particular, it is argued that the traditional concepts of reliability and validity should be conceptualised as trustworthiness, rigor and quality (Golafshani, 2003). Reid *et al.*

(2005) argue that, as a methodology, IPA advocates many of the principles of 'good practice' that signify as quality markers in qualitative research.

While verbatim extracts present a 'grounding in examples' (e.g. Elliott *et al.*, 1999) which allow the reader to make his or her own assessment of the interpretations presented, it is acknowledged that IPA is inevitably subjective so the results are not given the status of facts (Reid *et al.*, 2005). However, admissions of subjectivity may serve to underplay the rigour applied to the process of analysis. As Willig (2008) explains:

'The difference between a methodological interpretation of a text such as an interview transcript, and the researcher's subjective view of it is that the former is based upon a systematic, cyclical process of critical reflection and challenge of the interpreter's own emerging interpretations whereas the latter is the product of the author's unmediated associations and reaction' (Willig, 2008, p.156).

Indeed, Smith *et al.* (2009) argue that:

'making sense of how the participant is making sense of their experience requires immersive and disciplined attention to the unfolding account of the participant and what can be gleaned from it' (p.180).

A further limitation of the current research relates to issues of generalisation. The sample cannot be viewed as representative of all adolescent girls and thus it cannot be assumed that emergent themes are straightforwardly applicable to other young people. However, achieving a representative sample is not the aim of most approaches to qualitative research. IPA, in particular, challenges the traditional linear relationship between 'number of participants' and value of research (Reid *et al.*, 2005). IPA offers the researcher a chance to engage with a research question at an idiographic level, in producing in-depth analysis of the accounts of a small number of participants. Any conclusions drawn are specific to the particular group of participants

and generalisations to the wider population should be approached with caution (Smith *et al.*, 2009).

Although the aim of the study was not to draw general conclusions about social support for children and young people, the present context of a school-based friendship group does provide a source of rich descriptions which illuminate the meaning of social support as it reveals itself through adolescent girls' lived experience of daily interactions with their friends.

4.4 Suggestions for future research

In order to be able to make more general claims about young people's understandings and experiences of social support, results of this exploratory research need to be examined in other adolescent populations. Similar studies in other contexts might serve to enrich the description of the phenomenon of social support for children and young people. It would be interesting to explore the meaning and experiences of social support within all-male and gender-mixed friendship groups, as well as those that are community-based and exist predominantly out of school. Given the considerable evidence that now exists to suggest that children and adolescents form friendships based on a variety of shared demographic characteristics including ethnicity (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003), it is note-worthy that the participants in the present study were from different ethnic groups. Future research might usefully examine the relevance of ethnicity on the social support experiences within adolescent friendship groups.

Through exploring the experiences and perceptions of adolescents within a friendship group, this qualitative research has made some efforts to move the study

of social support beyond the individual level. In doing so, it has highlighted groups as significant providers of social support in the lives of young people and raises the possibility that the nature of support received from group membership is different to that offered by dyadic peer relationships, and may afford unique benefits to adolescent development. Indeed, Felton and Berry (1992) argue that placing sole focus on individual-to-individual ties ignores the important roles of groups in people's lives, which is key to our understanding of their social worlds.

Future research may wish to investigate the extent to which adolescents' social support is derived from friendship groups rather than dyadic relationships and any differences in the way such support is understood and experienced by adolescents. In considering the appropriate unit of analysis for social support research, it should also be noted that small friendship groups are necessarily connected to wider networks of peers within the school environment, and these larger peer networks may also fulfil different social support functions.

The friendship group is a dynamic rather than a static entity and is manifest differently at different ages; thus it is likely that the nature of social support provided by the friendship group and the way in which social support is defined and redefined by individuals will also change over time. Longitudinal research or a series of case studies would add to the emerging picture of how social support in the context of the friendship group is understood and experienced by individuals over time.

5. Conclusions

A substantial body of work on the concept of social support has resulted in many definitions, but none has been accepted as definitive (Williams *et al.*, 2004). As a

result, many quantitative studies have oriented towards different conceptualisations and in doing so have produced inconsistent and even conflicting findings. The meaning of social support to those being studied is an important question that quantitative research has not addressed. It is argued here that contextualised definitions of social support, such as those emerging from the present study, may improve clarity and confidence in research findings by producing consistency and comparability among quantitative studies.

In responding to criticisms about the way in which social support is typically defined in the literature, bypassing the closed systems of hypotheses and a priori theories, and in keeping with community psychology's concern with people within the context of their own natural settings, the present study provides a rich and contextualised description of the meaning of social support for one group of adolescent girls. As an example of an alternative way of approaching social support research, this study may contribute to the existing body of knowledge through debate, challenge or development of some of the current understandings of the meaning of the phenomenon for children and young people.

With regard to theoretical discussion, this study adopted an inductive approach, exploring the concept of social support through the eyes of participants, rather than imposing upon the participants and context a potentially inappropriate definition that is removed from real life. In doing so, the findings offer tentative support for the main-effect model of social support, indicating that conceptualisations of the phenomenon in extant literature hold some relevance to the lived experiences of adolescents in the context of a secondary school, who engage in a reciprocal process of social support throughout the day.

With regard to the empirical literature, the present study may be seen as adding to a growing number of detailed, small-scale, complementary qualitative studies which are furthering our understanding of the way in which social support functions for children and adolescents. As Smith *et al.* (2009) assert:

‘IPA is not opposed to more macro level claims but it steadfastly asserts the value of complementary micro analyses, analyses which may enrich the development of more macro accounts’ (p.202).

The current findings supplement those from some previous studies exploring social support experiences of adolescents in particular contexts, prompting greater confidence in their generalisability. In combination with others, the nuanced and contextual insights drawn from the present study could inform or complement quantitative studies on social support. For example, such findings could be used to arrive at more ecologically-sensitive constructs on which quantitative measures of social support can be based (Stein & Mankowski, 2004). Furthermore, understandings based on a deeper, more personal analysis which is true to the experiences of participants will have greater utility among practitioners in a position to enhance the benefits of naturally-occurring supportive relationships for adolescents.

In summary, the current study provides a rich and detailed description of adolescent girls’ understandings and experiences of social support, grounded in a specific context. It offers an example of a new and different approach to social support research which adheres to the meanings prescribed by those with direct experience of the context being studied, and in doing so produces a nuanced and sensitive conceptualisation of social support which can be operationalised from the point of view of research, intervention and practice.

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Appendix 1

School of Education ethics research form

[not available in the digital version of this thesis]

Appendix 2

Participant consent form

Pupil Information Sheet

Dear _____

- I would like to invite you to take part in a research project about friendships. The young people who agree to take part in the project will be part of the same friendship group in school. That's because I'm interested in finding out about the help and support you get from being part of a friendship group.
- Your Headteacher has already agreed for the study to take place in school. I need to ask your parents/carers for their permission, and I also want to make sure that you are happy to take part in the project.
- If you agree to be in this project, you will meet with me one-to-one to talk about your experiences of being in a friendship group. This session will last for about 1 hour and will take place at school in November/December 2009. I will ask you some questions to help get the conversation started but there are no wrong or right answers! The session will be audio taped so that I have a good record of what was said. No one else will listen to the recording.
- On another day I will come to sit with you and your other friends taking part in the project during class or lunch times. This is so that I can get a feeling of what it is like to be in your friendship group and an understanding of the kinds of things you talk about and do together.
- You will also be given the option of keeping a diary of your friendship experiences for up to 2 weeks.

- All the information that I get from carrying out the project will be written up in a report that other people will read. Your name will not be put in the report so what you have said will not be linked to you in any way. I will not talk to other people about what you tell me about your friendships.
- Being in this project is your choice. It's okay if you don't want to take part or if you change your mind later and want to stop half way through.
- Please keep this information sheet in a safe place in case you want to read it again in the future.
- You can ask any questions you have about the project now or at any time.

Catherine Lander, [REDACTED]

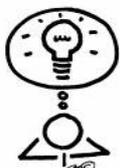
Pupil Consent Form

Dear _____

Please read the Pupil Information Sheet before filling in this form. Please read the statements below and tick the boxes if you agree with them. Signing your name at the bottom of the page means that you agree to take part in this project.



I have read the information sheet about this project.



I have had time to think about the information.



I understand that I am choosing to be involved and I can leave the project at any time without giving a reason.



I understand that the things I talk about in this project will be written in a report. My name will not be used so no one will know who said what.



I understand that the session will be audio taped so that there is a good record of what was said.



I agree to take part in this project about how young people experience support within friendship groups.

(Please print your full name)

(Please sign your name)

(Date)

Thank you for your time in reading and completing this form. Please return it to [redacted], along with the consent form from your parents/carers.

Catherine Lander, [redacted]

Appendix 3

Parent / carer consent form

Dear Parent / Carer,

I am writing to ask for your help in a research project being carried out at Hillcrest School between November and December 2009. The project aims to explore adolescent girls' experiences of social support within their friendship groups.

I would like to invite your daughter to take part in this project. In total, six pupils from the same friendship group are being asked to participate.

During the project, I will meet with each of the pupils separately to talk to them about their experiences of being in a friendship group. I will not report the information to anyone else. The interviews will be audio taped and written down.

I will also sit with the pupils in class and at a break/ lunch time, in order to gain an understanding of the kinds of things they talk about and do together. The pupils will also be asked to keep a diary of their friendship experiences for up to two weeks.

The information that I collect during the research will be written up in a report. None of the pupils will be named in the report, so no one will be able to tell who has said which things. Your daughter can change her mind about taking part in the project at any time, without having to give a reason.

If you are happy for your daughter to take part in this project then please complete the *Parent/Carer Consent Form*. Your daughter will need to complete the *Pupil Consent Form*. A Pupil Information Sheet is also provided, which explains what your daughter can expect from taking part in the project. Please return the completed consent forms to [REDACTED] at [REDACTED] by Tuesday 3rd November.

If you have any questions about the project then please do not hesitate to contact me on [REDACTED].

Many thanks for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Catherine Lander

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Parent / Carer Consent Form

Please complete the information below and send it, along with the Pupil Consent Form, to [REDACTED] at [REDACTED] by Tuesday 3rd November 2009.

I / We give our permission for our daughter to take part in the research project exploring adolescent girls' experiences of social support within their friendship groups.

Name:

Signed:

Date:

Name of daughter:

Appendix 4

Interview schedule

Introduction

- Explain rationale and procedure
- Explain confidentiality and limits of confidentiality
- Obtain verbal consent and check participant has signed consent form
- Ask if the participant has any questions

Rapport building

- Could we start by you telling me a bit about yourself?

Prompt: What kind of things do you like to do?

Semi-structured interview questions

[Research Q1: How do adolescent girls understand and experience social support within their friendship groups?]

- Can you tell me about your friends in school?
- How did you become friends?
- What do you get from knowing each other? (*write on post-its and rate importance*)

Prompt: How do your friends help you?

Prompt: What do you think your life would be like if you didn't have any friends?

- What does it mean to be a good friend?

Prompt: In what ways are you a good friend?

- What are your best experiences of being in your friendship group?

[Research Q2: In what contexts do experiences of social support take place during the school day?]

- When do you have contact with your friends in a typical school day? (*use timeline 1*)
- What kinds of things do you do together at this time?
- Where are you at this time? (*use school map*)

[Research Q3: In what contexts do experiences of social support take place outside the school day?]

- When do you have contact with your friends outside of the school day? (*use timeline 2*)
Prompt: In the evenings, weekends, Saturdays?
- What kinds of things do you do together at this time?
- Where are you at this time?

General prompts

- Can you tell me a bit more about that?
- What do you mean when you say . . . ?

Debrief

'Those were all my questions'

- Is there anything else that you would like to add?
- Do you have any questions about what we've been talking about?

Appendix 5

Summary record of participant observation

Context notes:

Event(s)	Break time
Setting	Participants' form room Second floor, far west corner of school
Layout of physical setting	'Traditional' classroom layout – tables (with 2 chairs at each) facing front of classroom towards whiteboard and teacher's desk
Names and relevant details of people involved	Jade, Shantelle, Josie, Chloe, Riz, Noreen 9 other pupils in classroom Total of 4 friendship groups
Various activities of the participants	Talking, eating snacks, listening to music on mobile phones, Chloe had fiction book open (not reading it)

Observation notes:

Participants sat or stood together in far corner of form room, next to radiator.

Chatting together within friendship group (i.e. 6 participants) – talking about TV programmes (e.g. last night's Eastenders), celebrity gossip (e.g. Katie Price).

Other pupils in room arguing (about Facebook) – Chloe went to speak briefly with another girl who was crying.

Participants stood watching, looked on disapprovingly, didn't seem surprised about argument, rolled eyes, '*They're so stupid*' (Shantelle), comments made to me about the other girls always falling out.

Researcher's reflections:

Participants have to 'snatch' moments together during school day (do not have long together at break by the time they navigate three flights of stairs and various corridors to form room).

Friendship groups clearly identifiable in form due to spatial locations (i.e. clustered around separate tables / in different areas of the classroom).

Participants don't like to get involved in arguments between other groups

Seem to prefer to separate themselves, 'stay out of it'.

Impact of being observed: conversation was light-hearted and fairly trivial - is this typical, or do girls talk about more personal/private topics?

Emotional support	<p>get on.</p> <p>I: When you say you're one of the 'strongest' groups what do you mean by 'strong'?</p> <p>P: We'll support each other, we'll help each other, we'll guide each other.</p>	
	<p>I: In what kind of ways?</p>	<p>'Guide' – steer? Lead? Learn from one another?</p>
Being there	<p>P: Umm, like my friend come in upset today a little bit, she's a little bit, I don't know what happened, and I said you know "Is everything alright? If anything's wrong you know that we're all there". If anyone's upset we're always there for them.</p>	<p>Repetition of 'always there' – is this what social support means to her?</p>
	<p>I: When you say you're 'always there for them', what would that look like?</p>	
Being there	<p>Sitting with them, comforting them, making them laugh [pause]. Always looking out for each other. Maybe</p>	<p>Physical presence</p>
Fulfilling a need to talk	<p>when someone's got a problem and they need to talk, we'll say "It'll sort itself out, don't worry about it, it's nothing to worry about".</p>	<p>Distraction from problems</p>
Emotional support	<p>I: [Post-its]. What kind of things do you get from knowing each other?</p>	<p>Offering comfort and reassurance</p>
	<p>P: Me learning things. I mean I used to absolutely hate reading and then [name], we call them the book club in</p>	<p>Learning from one another / influencing</p>

Sharing interests	<p>class cos all they do is read, they must get through a lot, you know all those Twilight books, all through them in about three weeks. I used to hate reading and she was like “Just try a book, just try one”, so I did and now I love reading, that’s all we do at dinnertime just read.</p> <p>I: Anything else?</p> <p>P: I think I’ve changed an awful lot. I mean before I didn’t really want to know anyone, just be with my friends and that’s it. But now I’m not like that, I want to get to know more, I want to see what everyone likes, the things they’re into. Because they’re like that so when they’re like that, you tend to think what they’re doing I’ll do.</p>	<p>one another in positive ways</p> <p>Presenting group as academic / bookish</p>
Social identity	<p>I: That’s really interesting. Is there anything else that you get from knowing each other?</p>	<p>Personal change as a result of being part of group</p>
Sharing interests		
Social influence	<p>P: Umm. Maybe to be more careful about who you choose. Like, like I said I never used to be with those. Since I’ve been with them I’ve learnt not to say anything behind people’s back it just causes trouble, or not to, cos if they don’t do it I won’t do it, I suppose its being influenced. And they don’t do anything wrong so I</p>	<p>Conforming to group norms?</p> <p>Social comparison with previous friends</p> <p>Learning from one another</p>
Norms – mutual trust		
Social influence		<p>Importance of not talking behind backs – trust?</p>

<p>Being alike</p> <p>Group vs. Individual identity</p>	<p>won't. I'm happier as well when I go home and not upset about what someone's said.</p> <p>I: So were things different then before you became friends with this group?</p> <p>P: Yeah it was. Like I used to be friends with these other girls and they were just always insulting you if you wasn't what they were like, it was you can't have your own opinion it's theirs or nowhere. Went to the house it was just I don't really wanna be here I wanna go home. Once you find a good friendship it's really hard to break away though. And I thought I found it, I thought this is a great group. No. Nothing . . .[trails off]</p> <p>I: And now when you compare that group to the group you're in now what do you think the difference is?</p>	<p>Values stability of group / lack of arguments and upset</p> <p>Social comparison</p> <p>Pressure to conform</p> <p>Importance of having things in common but wanting to retain individual voice/identity</p>
<p>Group identity</p>	<p>P: Major difference. I think our group now is exactly what friendship should be like. It shouldn't be any arguing, it should just be school life and everything like that, and that's what it is.</p> <p>I: What other things do you get from knowing each other?</p> <p>P: Probably a lot more social life as</p>	<p>Ideal group</p> <p>Importance of not arguing – this distracts from school engagement?</p>

<p>Fulfilling a need to talk</p> <p>Social acceptance</p> <p>Group norms – mutual trust</p>	<p>well. I mean with them you can talk, you can talk to them about anything, they won't laugh; they won't do anything. But when I was with this other group, it'll go round, it'll spread. I can talk to them about secrets or something deep, I mean Chloe and the others know everything about each other, don't think there's nothing that we don't know.</p> <p>I: Anything else you think that you get from your friends that's important to you?</p> <p>P: Um I dunno like maybe tips on life. It's gonna sound really, really stupid. Like if I go to someone's house and we're like doing make-up to go out, they'll say like "Why don't you use mine? Do it my way?" so silly things, that you don't really notice.</p>	<p>Importance of talk</p> <p>Not being judged</p> <p>Talk and trust are linked</p> <p>Social comparison: talking behind backs / spreading secrets</p> <p>Knowing one another fully</p>
<p>Offering practical support</p>	<p>I: What do you think it means to be a good friend?</p>	<p>Seems incidental to her – but part of typical activities so has significance</p> <p>Sharing / offering advice</p>
<p>Mutual trust</p>	<p>P: I think you need to be able to let them have their own opinion. I think err you need to be trusted, trustworthy, so like if someone tells you something you keep it private. I think you need to be a little bit confident as well [pause] maybe to</p>	<p>Importance of respecting difference of opinion</p> <p>Keeping secrets</p> <p>Guiding one another</p>

<p>Social acceptance</p>	<p>guide them.</p> <p>I: In what way do you need to guide them?</p> <p>P: Like if they're stuck or need help or just want general help like in life. Or if something that I've experienced that they haven't then I could tell them about it and guide them through it. [Pause] I think you need to be not, not to be, as if to think you're better than them so it doesn't matter, I think you need to be, accept that everyone's at the same level so it doesn't matter about anything. I think you need to be quite calm as well. Cos if someone's a bit [pause] roary I suppose then they realise that you're not then they probably won't be like that, they'll probably think well we can probably have a civilised conversation so I'll just talk.</p> <p>I: It was interesting what you said about letting them have their own opinion. Can you tell me a little bit about what you meant by that?</p> <p>P: Maybe if someone's got a different view of what you're looking at then I think you should just let them have that and say "Oh yeah, I see where you're coming from now", you know</p>	<p>Learning from one another / sharing</p> <p>Struggling to articulate</p> <p>Not judging one another</p> <p>Viewing each other as equals</p> <p>Keeping the peace – not wanting arguments</p> <p>Keeping the peace</p> <p>Trying to see /accept different perspectives</p>
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<p>Group norm – avoid arguments?</p> <p>Being alike</p>	<p>what I mean?</p> <p>I: Yeah, I think so. How good do you think your group are at doing all the things that you've told me about?</p> <p>P: Brilliant. We've never had a big bust up. It's so different to other groups [pause]. The other group have kind of split up now. There used to be six and now there's only four and the two, they just don't wanna know them now. And they used to be really best buddies. They don't wanna know now, that's because they got kicked out the group and said if you're not like us then we don't wanna know you.</p> <p>I: So this idea about accepting that people are different, accepting different opinions is quite important you think?</p> <p>P: Yeah but I think that's like maybe what they've been brought up to know isn't it really? I think it helps at home as well, like when I get home I know I've got a loving background that'll do anything for me and support me no whatever I do. And I don't think, maybe some people don't have a lot of that which changes their</p>	<p>Differences shouldn't be problematic</p> <p>Emphatic about not arguing 'never'</p> <p>Social comparison to other groups 'splitting up'</p> <p>'Kicked out' – aggressive, definitive, no choice</p> <p>Pressures to be alike / conform</p> <p>Comments on others' upbringing</p> <p>Influence of home</p>
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<p>Being there</p>	<p>attitudes about at school.</p> <p>I: What are your best experiences of being in your friendship group?</p> <p>P: I had an operation in April on my foot. And I remember that Chloe was there, always, just always there, generally, “Do you want to do this, do you want to do that, anything you want to do?” And the rest were just the same, always checking on me. I had a week off school and then I came to school and they were all like “Oh, are you alright, what happened?” Exactly what friends are for, how you need to be a friend to people, and that’s exactly how they were to me. It made me want to come to school so I can come to school and be who I wanna be.</p>	<p>environment on school attitudes/behaviour</p> <p>Always there – physical presence</p>
<p>Social acceptance / validation</p>	<p>I: [Timeline] When do you have contact with your friends in a typical school day?</p>	<p>Definition of friendship</p> <p>Helped her to be who she wants to be (self-concept)</p>
<p>Influence of context – home locality</p>	<p>P: I walk to school with a different friend and then I’ll ring Chloe to see where she is, and if she’s on the bus or bus stop. And then I’ll wait for her at the bottom of the hill if she’s close or if she’s not I’ll just meet her in school. Sometimes Chloe might stop at mine, probably just Chloe cos the</p>	<p>Friends live far apart – restricts contact out of</p>

Talk	<p>others live quite far. My Dad works just by where she lives. I've never been to my other friends cos it's probably a bit too far, I'm not even sure where they live, I've never heard of the areas.</p>	<p>school</p>
Influence of school context	<p>Registration. We'll meet and then we'll go sit in the corner. We'll read or just talk. Right now it's the X Factor we're talking about.</p> <p>Lessons. Tend to walk together to our lessons unless we've got different lessons, in different sets.</p> <p>We don't really talk in lessons unless we're sitting together, otherwise we get told off.</p> <p>Break. Break we'll go to the corner and we all have our little places we sit in form. We sit and eat, read, err laughing and joking, probably we play fight sometimes!</p> <p>Lunch time. Again we'll be eating in form. [Name] and [name] will go down and get food from the canteen and then come back for about 10 minutes. We probably read, just general gossip about what we're doing at the weekend, where we're going, do you wanna come, make arrangements.</p>	<p>Not familiar with where other friends live</p> <p>Own location within form room</p> <p>Talk is often incidental</p> <p>Influence of ability grouping – limits time spent together at school</p> <p>Seating plans</p> <p>Very little talk within class</p> <p>Own location within form room – friendship groups are spatially separated?</p> <p>Everyday activities – read, gossip</p>

<p>Social activity</p>	<p>End of school day. We walk down the hill altogether but then they all catch the bus and I walk home.</p> <p>I: [Timeline] When do you have contact with your friends outside of the school day?</p> <p>P: On a Saturday, we'll probably go cinema, or meet up in town. Like we did on 15th on Shantelle's birthday. We'll shop. We'll go McDonalds and eat.</p> <p>I: Do you keep in touch in any other ways?</p> <p>P: Yeah on the phone I will, umm on the house phone I'll phone someone. They all probably all go on MSN and Facebook and stuff but I don't like really like all of that. I email them when I'm bored.</p>	<p>Plans for socialising</p>
<p>Influence of community environment – home locality</p>	<p>I think the distance is a big problem I suppose. If they all lived local it would be a lot easier. Probably we don't meet up as much as we'd like, I suppose its more like, I'll meet up with Chloe cos she lives quite close.</p> <p>I: Is there anything else that you'd like to add or tell me about?</p> <p>P: I don't think so. That's it really.</p>	<p>Keep in touch via phone, email.</p> <p>MSN and Facebook.</p> <p>Still able to maintain frequency of contact despite distance</p> <p>Distance is a 'big problem'. Restricts contact (nature but not frequency?)</p>

Appendix 7

Overview of emerging themes across participant accounts

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Jade	Shantelle	Josie	Chloe	Riz
Always there – social activities (see below): ‘If we have problems we try to make each other feel better (stop thinking about it by going out).	Being there: Constant physical presence (in lessons; to sit by and talk to) Being there is linked to being alike/the same.	Being there: Physical presence (sitting together) Comforting them Distracting them from their problems Cf. Being alone before joining friendship group: ‘only me’; ‘just me’.	Always there: To tell them stuff, offload problems Cf. Being alone: ‘And if you don’t have any friends you’d just be by yourself’.	Always there: ‘like if I’m upset, they just cheer me up’. Go to them if I have arguments at home. Always being there vs. Being alone: ‘And if you don’t have any friends you’d just be by yourself’.
Talk about anything/ not always important things: ‘what we’ve done on the weekends and about lessons, different films’.	Talking: need/urge to talk (about anything).	Talking: in confidence, about anything, about something deep.		Having someone to talk to is linked to not getting bored.
Interested in the same things.	Having things in common / being alike – linked to being there.	Having things in common (group identity) vs. Being able to have own opinion (individual identity).	Having things in common binds together their friendships so they agree more and don’t argue / fall out.	Having things in common: link to best friend being from same primary school – initiated conversation.
Sharing interests: ‘Kind of know who’s	Bringing out the best in you / trying new things.	Learning from one another / ‘being	Reading: ‘I think I kind of got it from them to read’.	‘Things I never used to do, I do now’ i.e.

good at what talents, what they're interested in, and you get interested too'.		influenced' to be different /try new things (e.g. reading).		homework.
Emphasis on social activities – having fun and not being bored: 'Wouldn't have anything to do and go out places all the time. Just stay in the house and be bored'. Social activity as way of making each other feel better.	Social activities: spending time at each others' houses (important element of friendship?) 'We don't really keep in touch outside of school. Like you'd think that we weren't really that close but we are. But it's more like a school friendship'.	Social activities: Ref to having 'a lot more social life' (but links this with talking/sharing things). Doesn't emphasise social activities as being that important.	Social activities: Importance of meeting new people and making new friends – the group has played a role in her socialisation? 'make me more open, not open, not as shy' Social invitations brought them together as a group.	Social activities: 'We go out' (on special occasions), we don't always go over each other's house and stuff like that. . . ' Link to Shantelle's ref.
	Being there to offer practical support: 'Somebody that will help you out or lend you money'.	Little things / tips of life (e.g. helping with makeup).	Practical/instrumental support: 'They help you with your homework'. Sharing things (hair bands, makeup).	
Group norms: Trust / keeping secrets 'If I was told a secret I wouldn't tell anyone else'. 'Being nice to them and not being horrible or telling people what they don't want me to	Group identity: Normal ones, calm & collected Difficulty of bringing new people into the group Social comparison: Talking behind backs (two-faced).	Group norms: not talking behind people's backs. Social comparison with past friends / others in form; 'strongest group' Group identity / togetherness 'We're all really, really	Importance of trust: sees them as a group because 'I can trust them'.	

tell them’.		good friends’. Group is something you join (choice) but can be ‘kicked out’ of (brutal, decisive, no choice)		
Acceptance/ being yourself: ‘You can be yourself around them’.	Acceptance: even if you do something stupid. Challenges of conformity – don’t feel so alone when you have friends who are like you. Social / cultural differences shouldn’t matter	Acceptance: Not judging; viewing each other as equals; ref to home/background Social comparison with previous group: pressure to conform / be the same.	Validation: ‘It made me want to come to school so I can be who I want to be’.	
Context: in the same lessons, get to know your friends more. ‘We see each other mostly at school’. MSN, Facebook, phone.	Context: ability grouping, seating, influence of teachers, upbringing / home life	Context: living far apart; influence of home / background	Context: seating; keep in touch through text, msn, Facebook.	Context: living far apart; seating; school rules & environment (staying in form a lot).
	Language: repetition of ‘close’ / ‘closer’.	Language: Similar to intimate relationships i.e. with partner ‘with them’; ‘went with different people’; ‘broke off’; ‘split up’.		

Appendix 8

Feedback from participant validation meeting

Feedback on emerging themes

- Being there: participants identified this as the theme that most reflected their experiences with their friends. There was overlap with their views on group belonging (below).
- Group belonging:
 - *'if we weren't a group, we'd be lonely'*
 - *'you get different views from different people'*
 - *'if its' just two of you then you might be isolated'.*
- Social acceptance / validation:
 - *'none of us have to try and impress each other'*
 - *'other girls worry they might get kicked out of their group'*
- Influence of context:
 - Issues re having many lessons with pupils from own form group / not mixing with others – *'isolates you in Year 7 and 8'; 'I know less people in different forms'; 'scares me in Year 10 - we'll be in more lessons with other forms'; 'we have to stick together'; 'not mixing with other forms in a good and bad thing'.*

Feedback on research process

- Participants enjoyed the research process, although they were initially nervous about taking part in the study.
- The interviews prompted the girls to reflect with one another on the positives within their friendship group. After their individual interviews, they had talked to each other about some of the questions that had been raised and their responses to these.
- Participants were pleased that they all held similar views about their friendship group. The research had helped them to 'appreciate' the importance of their group and what they gain from being a part of it.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

1. Reflections on my choice of IPA methodology

A phenomenological research stance was adopted in the present study in order to counter the overtly positivist, quantitative approaches of much of the current literature on social support. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen because it is consonant with the aims of the research, capturing the researcher's concern with exploring how participants experience and make sense of their world (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

IPA was chosen over other qualitative methods, including grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), for a number of reasons. Firstly, IPA studies aim to select a small number of participants in order to illuminate a particular research question and to develop a full interpretation of the data, rather than to keep collecting data in the light of the analysis that has taken place, until no new themes are emerging (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). A second and related point is that IPA is likely to offer a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the lived experience of a small number of participants with an emphasis on the convergence and divergence between participants, rather than seeking to establish a more conceptual level account that makes claims for the broader population based on a relatively large sample (Smith *et al.*, 2009). Thirdly, grounded theory has been criticised for sidestepping questions of reflexivity, whereas IPA, in keeping with good practice for qualitative researchers, goes much further than many other approaches in addressing such issues (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Indeed, a particular strength of IPA lies in its acceptance of the impossibility of gaining direct access to participants' life worlds and its willingness to

acknowledge explicitly and embrace the researcher's involvement in the research process. Chapter One outlined my social identity, background and values in acknowledging that the researcher's position and perspective may have shaped the research. Throughout the process, I subjected myself as a researcher to self-scrutiny and reflected upon my role in the dynamic process of data collection and analysis. According to Brocki and Wearden (2006) such awareness and open discussion of the possible influences of the researcher's subjectivity may serve to increase the transparency of the research account.

In reflecting on the research process, I have found that IPA has enabled the voices of the adolescent girls to be heard with a richness and depth that would have been difficult to achieve with less idiographic methods. Furthermore, feedback from the participants indicates that the research process enabled them to listen to and affirm each others' views of their friendship group, particularly the strengths and resources which they had not previously reflected upon together.

IPA provides researchers with systematic guidelines which, although not intended to be followed prescriptively, allow them to identify and progressively integrate themes (Willig, 2008). The detailed descriptions and clear language used by Smith and colleagues (2009) increase the accessibility of IPA for a researcher unfamiliar with the approach. For me, the guidelines were invaluable, although they could engender an overreliance by the novice researcher, resulting in a reluctance to proceed with analysis in a more flexible, open or creative way.

The rationale for the adoption of IPA in the present study was not only based on its consonance with the research aims but also my orientation to the principles of community psychology. As such, the fit between IPA and community psychology is

worthy of reflection. Stein and Mankowski (2004) note that the merits of qualitative research have been increasingly recognised by community psychologists in the last decade. Furthermore, it is argued here that the underlying philosophical position of IPA embodies many of the values of community psychology. For example, demonstrating sensitivity to people's contexts is identified by Barker and Pistrang (2005) as one of a number of guiding principles for community psychology studies on which research quality can be judged. In the present study, recognition of the importance of 'person-in-context' (Orford, 1992) was illustrated by conducting the research in the naturalistic setting of school with a purposive sample of participants who shared a particular experience of social support through membership of the same friendship group. Further sensitivity to context was displayed through close engagement with the idiographic and the particular; a central feature of IPA (Smith *et al.*, 2009). In this and other ways, the study was able to show how IPA warrants special attention as a relatively new methodology appropriate for community psychology research.

2. Reflections on the contribution of the study to my practice as an Educational Psychologist

Although not aimed specifically at educational psychologists (EPs), findings from the current research hold much relevance for educational psychology and thus deserve additional reflection with regard to implications for my own professional practice.

Firstly, within the limits previously discussed, this research gives some indication of 'what works' in terms of social support for adolescents. If replicated with other

samples, the findings suggest that EPs should perhaps be more cautious in recommending interventions such as 'circle of friends' and assigned buddies or mentors. Rather, they should adopt an approach which capitalises on naturally occurring support systems in young people's various social contexts and searches for any existing strengths and resources within peer relationships, before attempting to intervene with artificially cultivated alternatives.

Secondly, the findings from this study have illustrated the importance of context and particularly the impact of features of the school environment and organisation on pupils' learning, behaviour and social and emotional well-being. EPs could play a greater role in ensuring that education and community environments are more facilitative of social supportive experiences for children and young people. The behaviour environment checklist from the Framework for Intervention (Daniels & Williams, 2000) was designed by educational psychologists to help teachers tackle concerns about pupils' behaviour using environmental change. It covers a wide range of factors including whole-school policies and classroom organisation, but could be further developed to include more specific reference to the social context which is so crucial to young people's experiences in school.

Thirdly, IPA has shown me the benefits of taking time to explore in detail the experiences of young people from their own perspectives. While EPs already ascertain and represent the 'voice of the child' for the purposes of reports (Harding & Atkinson, 2009), this can sometimes appear to be tokenistic. For example, Alderson (2000, in Harding & Atkinson, 2009) emphasises the limitations of a brief one-off meeting in enabling effective consultation with children and young people to take place. This research represents an attempt to look at the world as the young person

sees it and to understand how it is 'put together' in a way that makes sense to the individual (Quicke, 2000). Taking such time and care in everyday practice to treat young people as experts on their own experiences and to understand their perspectives not only conveys respect in demonstrating a genuine attempt to involve them in the problem solving process, but could also help EPs to remove barriers to participation and to think more creatively about solutions to problems (e.g. Gray & Wilson, 2004).

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