

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time

T.S. Elliot (1944, p. 43)

A lasting and constant feature in our lives is change. Science and technology have advanced rapidly and as a result have altered our work practices (Charlton, 1998). They have seemingly transformed our home life too. Today parents appear less able or inclined to watch over their children because of full-time careers and an ever-quicken pace of life. Charlton (1998) lists a range of time-consuming technologies such as television, video and the Internet that can become obstacles within families and communities. Parents and children have less time to talk and listen to each other and can therefore lose touch with each other too easily. It seems that children are being swallowed up by the system and/or are being reduced to mere numbers. Parents expect schools to take responsibility for their children, teachers for disciplining them and school counsellors or psychologists for attending to their emotional well-being.

Young people need to feel loved and cared for as well as experience physical closeness with others. They have a need for a comforting presence, a sympathetic ear to listen, sincerity and opportunities to share their feelings. Within an educational setting, young people need to have access to support, preparation for the roles of adulthood and resources to help them to realize their potential. In this environment it is essential for them to learn how to accept responsibility for themselves and others and how to deal with the ethical problems and interpersonal conflicts that they will unavoidably come across in their lives (Cowie, 1999; Cowie & Wallace, 2000).

This is the ideal but unfortunately it does not necessarily happen (Cowie & Wallace, 2000), as adolescents do not always know how to deal

effectively with difficulties. Cowie and Wallace (2000) are of the opinion that too many young people experience emotions such as fear, anxiety, depression and/or isolation. This may lead to the young person feeling that others are unconcerned about his or her suffering. Children and adolescents therefore seldom share their misery with anyone.

Adolescents often do not feel comfortable talking to someone in an authority position. The peer group therefore has an advantage: children feel more comfortable talking to someone they can identify with and whom they feel can understand them better. Salmivalli (1999), in Cowie and Wallace (2000), argues that the influence of the peer group can be utilized to end unwanted behaviour (such as bullying) and to enhance the quality of interpersonal relationships. The foundation of peer support is the resources that occur naturally within friendships and between friends (Cowie, Naylor, Talamelli, Chauhan & Smith, 2002).

Peer support can be defined as: “Actions taken by individuals of the same age that involve lending emotional and social sustenance or assistance to each other in a reciprocal unidirectional manner” (Snell & Janney, 2000, p. 3). At the school where this study was conducted, students meet up with a peer supporter at break time or in their free periods and talk about what is bothering them. The peer supporter, who is trained in basic counselling skills, counsels the student up to a certain point and then, if need be, refers them to the school psychologist. The process of peer support is discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

Aims of the study

This study aims, in a qualitative way, to explore the experiences, thoughts and feelings of three adolescent peer supporters and provide rich and thick descriptions of their stories. Postmodernism, social constructionism and narrative psychology are combined and identified as a framework for the research. The research material gathered by means of individual interviews, focus groups and journaling reflects the realities co-constructed by the

participants and the researcher. The researcher also makes use of reflexivity by including a description of her own experience of the research process.

Rationale for and value of the study

Most of the local research on peer support (Visser, 2004; Visser, Schoeman & Perold, 2004) is focused on the implementation, evaluation and effectiveness of a peer support programme whereas the focus here is on the emotional experiences of the peer supporters themselves. This study could therefore be useful in that it could add to the minimal body of information in this regard. Furthermore, it might inspire and/or motivate teachers and/or psychologists from other schools to follow suit and implement an effective peer support programme in other high schools. This study could provide valuable information on how to work effectively with peer supporters.

The narratives that emerge from this study could be used to empower, inspire and/or motivate the participants, other peer supporters as well as peer supporters in training in such a way that they are able to handle different situations that surface at school and in their own lives.

Finally, trainers of peer supporters, educators, school counsellors and psychologists could also find this information valuable, as it provides insight into the attitudes, thoughts, feelings and perceptions of three different peer supporters, therefore providing valuable information about the variety of emotional experiences that a peer supporter has to deal with.

Research approach

A detailed description of the research approach is given in **chapter 3**. The study draws on a social constructionist, narrative perspective (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). In social constructionism people create their realities together and meaning is created between people, in relationships. This study deals with participants who shared their stories verbally (interviews and focus groups) and in written form (journaling). The narrative approach

developed from the idea that people construct their own meaning. White and Epston (1990) believe that to construct meaning and to express ourselves, experience must be “storied”. It is in the process of storying that we find the meaning that we attach to experience.

The researcher utilizes qualitative and exploratory research as well as an open, flexible and inductive approach to the research (Durrheim, 1999). Three cases were selected on a voluntary basis and two individual unstructured interviews were conducted with each of the participants as well as two focus groups with all the participants present. In addition, each of the participants kept a journal containing their own personal experiences, thoughts and feelings throughout the whole research process. The research material obtained from the interviews, focus groups and journaling are described in **chapters 4, 5 and 6**.

Chapter 7 tells the story of the researcher’s reflections throughout the research process. Steier (1991) claims that reflexivity is a form of self-awareness that can be understood as a “bending back on itself” and “a turning-back of one’s experience upon oneself”. In this study reflexivity is used as a circular process with reflexivity itself as the guiding relationship which allows for the circularity (Steier, 1991). In the end the whole study will constitute a self-reflexive process in which both the participants and the researcher co-construct narratives and meaning around these narratives.

In the concluding chapter, the researcher evaluates the strengths and limitations of this study, summarizes the findings of the study and makes recommendations regarding peer support systems in the school where the research was conducted and to schools in general.

CHAPTER 2

ADOLESCENCE AND PEER SUPPORT

Someone should talk to them and reassure them and cheer them up.
MacLeod and Morris (1996, p. 85)

Adolescents are one of society's most vulnerable groups (Carty, Rosenbaum, Lafreniere & Sutton, 2000). Adolescents have to deal with many challenges that can impact on them in a positive or a negative way. Support from the peer group may have a positive rather than a negative effect on the adolescent's well-being.

In this chapter adolescent development in general is briefly explored, including physical, cognitive, affective and personality development of the adolescent. The social development of adolescents and research done in this regard are looked at, as this is the focus of the study. In addition, challenges of adolescence are investigated.

Support systems in schools and the importance of peer relationships and social support are described. The researcher also explores peer support groups, their history, key features and nature, and supervision of peer supporters.

Finally, the researcher depicts peer support in action, including its advantages and disadvantages, and clarifies current research done in South Africa on peer support.

What is adolescence?

Adolescence is the term associated with the developmental stage between childhood and adulthood (Kruger & Gouws, 1994; Louw, Louw & Van Ede, 1998).

Many authors tend to describe adolescence with reference to three stages (Kruger & Gouws, 1994; Louw et al., 1998):

- Early adolescence, between about 11 and 14 years
- Mid-adolescence, between about 14 and 18 years
- Late adolescence, between about 18 and 21 years.

It is difficult, however, to assign a specific chronological age to adolescence because of major cultural differences and because the age at which adolescence begins appears to be diminishing while the duration of adolescence is growing (Kruger & Gouws, 1994).

Within this developmental stage, physical, cognitive, affective, personality and social changes take place that impact on the adolescent.

Physical development in adolescence

The onset of adolescence manifests clearly in various physical and physiological changes. Body growth accelerates during puberty, the reproductive organs start functioning, adolescents reach sexual maturity and secondary sexual features emerge (Kruger & Gouws, 1994).

The adolescent observes these bodily changes with fascination and even shock. He or she consciously notices these changes and creates or ascribes meaning to them. This meaning affects his or her experience of and involvement with his or her body immensely. These changes may evoke feelings of wonder, pride and joy but also feelings of uncertainty, shame and aversion (Kruger & Gouws, 1994).

The adolescent is intensely and constantly aware of bodily development and worries whether he or she will develop naturally and adequately. These changes may therefore cause stress and problems for the adolescent (Kruger & Gouws, 1994; Louw et al., 1998).

Cognitive development in adolescence

Significant cognitive changes are often obscured by the dramatic bodily changes that take place during adolescence. Everything concerning knowing, including perception, conceptualisation, insight, knowledge, imagination and intuition, is integrated into cognitive development, which is also closely linked to experience and intentionality (Gouws, 1994).

In adolescence, cognitive changes lead to transformation of the child's concrete thinking ability into a more comprehensive and mature ability to analyse and to logically argue about concrete and abstract concepts (Louw et al., 1998). Jean Piaget's "formal operations" stage (Cockcraft, 2002) is of relevance in adolescence. The ability to formulate, test and evaluate hypotheses is involved in formal operational thought, and in the manipulation of known facts, systematic thinking (thinking ahead) and second-order processes, which involve thinking about thinking, connections between relationships and moving between reality and possibility (Cockcraft, 2002).

These new ways of thinking may impact on social relationships in such a way that the adolescent challenges certain beliefs, norms and values and certain social constructions. This questioning may lead to uncertainty and insecurity.

Moral development in adolescence

An important task of adolescence is to develop a personal value system. This means that the adolescent should develop a sense of the difference between right and wrong. Adolescents' cognitive ability, which consists in formulating, examining and drawing references from hypotheses, and abstract thinking, enables them to think about and form a rational outlook on alternative norms and values (Gouws, 1994; Louw et al., 1998).

The inherent ability to distinguish between right and wrong is referred to as developing a conscience. Conscience has many functions, for example, if people disregard their own personal norms, obligations and rights, their conscience becomes active. Conscience can also encourage adolescents to take responsibility for their actions and fix their mistakes (Gouws, 1994).

As with cognitive development, moral development may also lead to the questioning of beliefs, norms and values. The adolescent may question other people's and their own personal behaviour, in terms of discriminating between right and wrong, which may lead to the establishment of a personal value system. If moral development is inadequate it can lead to problems such as delinquency, sexual permissiveness and substance abuse (Gouws, 1994).

Affective and personality development in adolescence

Apart from the dramatic bodily, cognitive and moral changes during this developmental stage, dramatic personality and identity development also occurs. This includes the development of a distinct identity, sex role identity, career identity and ethnic identity, the development of the self-concept and emotional maturity (Kruger, 1994a; Louw et al., 1998).

These changes take place in rapid succession and can threaten the perception the adolescent has of him or herself. During childhood years a relatively stable self-concept has developed but with the onset of adolescence this self-concept is shaken to the core. The adolescent then experiences feelings of confusion and uncertainty which often cause tension and self-consciousness (Kruger, 1994a). The adolescent's self-concept and self-esteem can also impact on his or her social relations, for example if the adolescent has a negative self-image he or she may find it difficult to make friends.

Social development in adolescence

The adolescent also has to develop social maturity, in conjunction with the maturation of his or her bodily, cognitive, affective and moral functioning.

Significant developmental tasks during this stage include (Kruger, 1994b):

- Socialisation
- Discovering a position for him or herself in society
- Attaining interpersonal skills
- Learning to tolerate personal and cultural differences
- Acquiring self-confidence.

Consequently, parents' significance declines while acceptance by the peer group becomes progressively more important (Kruger, 1994b).

However, relationships with parents are only redefined to a certain extent but they are still highly significant in terms of the adolescent's well-being. Same sex friendships intensify and heterosexual relationships quickly take on a romantic or sexual element. As the adolescent becomes increasingly socially liberated, he or she has to deal with situations where decisions have to be made, situations where there is pressure to conform and situations where norms and values are examined (Kruger, 1994b).

Louw et al. (1998) contend that adolescents have a need to 'fit in', thus their social development is characterised by an increasing interest and involvement in the peer group. This increased interaction with the peer group and friends provides valuable interpersonal contact outside of family relationships and also plays an important role in the psychosocial development of the adolescent. Furthermore, it assists in satisfying the adolescent's emotional needs, is an important source of information and gives opportunities for socialising. In many ways the adolescent peer group can be seen as a separate culture that makes passage from adolescence into adulthood easier.

Social networks, according to Snell and Janney (2000), are shaped by the prospect of meeting other children. Children and adolescents create their social networks in different environments. This means that they often befriend other children who are in similar environments as them or have the same interests as them. In these environments, peers usually offer to act as support systems for each other. In Western culture, people use terms such as “cliques” and “crowds” (Snell & Janney, 2000, p. 23) to identify social networks of children and adolescents. Social networks and social groups give children a sense of belonging and self-esteem (Snell & Janney, 2000). Socialization and social learning processes have a significant influence on the development of young people’s behaviour and attitudes (Cowie et al., 2002).

The adolescent experiences various changes in different areas of his or her life, including the physical, cognitive, moral, affective and personality and social areas. These changes occur rapidly, which can overwhelm the adolescent and have implications for his or her self-esteem, well-being and social relations.

Challenges of adolescence

Sharp and Cowie (1998) state that in the United Kingdom roughly two million children have some form of mental health problem, including eating disorders, anxiety and depression. The level of suicide is constantly growing and emotional and conduct disorders are found in 10% of children and 20% of adolescents. Taking these figures into account, it seems that most children and adolescents encounter difficulties in their lives. Menna, Ruck, Silverman and Keating (2004) (in Menna & Ruck, 2004) indicate that the most common problems American adolescents and young adults experience centre around family, school, significant other, peers and work and/or career issues.

Research done by Thom (in Louw et al., 1998) shows that in South Africa both black and white adolescents experience adolescence as a difficult developmental stage. This experience is due not only to the effect of the physical, cognitive, personality and social development that takes place

during this stage, but also the influence of the change-oriented society in which they grow up. This society is marked by fast technological and social changes as well as changing roles, norms, ideologies and values. Furthermore, South African adolescents must form a synthesis between one of the many indigenous traditional cultures and the modern Western-orientated culture in order to eventually form an identity (Louw et al., 1998).

Research conducted by Boulter (in Louw et al., 1998) confirms that the drastic changes occurring in South African schools at the moment as well as social, personal and family changes mean that adolescents have immense adaptations to make. Boulter believes that South African adolescents struggle with issues such as self-confidence, emotional stability, health, family influences, personal freedom, group sociability and morality.

The above-mentioned research is evidence that adolescents experience different kinds of problems during adolescence. They may not always know how to deal with these problems effectively and may need support from someone in their environment in addition to their parents.

Support systems in schools

The social milieu of the child expands when he or she enters a school situation. For the child, the school situation means necessary social development – the opportunity to learn social skills, attitudes and values, to practise his or her social life, to learn how to communicate with others and so forth. The social and intellectual development of the child in school is mostly dependent on the quality and nature of interpersonal relationships he or she forms (Pretorius, 1998).

In the world of an adolescent, he or she has social relations with parents, siblings, friends, peers, teachers and other adults (Kruger, 1994b). These people serve as the adolescent's support network, people they can count on for help and support. At different times in our lives, this network may differ in size, structure and composition. Furthermore, a person's identity and

that of his or her support network are linked. This means that to a certain extent our identity centres on the fact that we are our parents' son or daughter, someone's friend or someone's neighbour (Vaux, 1988).

School counsellors or psychologists can form a significant part of the adolescent's support network. Since the 1920s in the United States, school counsellors have been an important part of the educational system (Foster, Young & Hermann, 2005). A remarkable increase in employment opportunities for school psychologists featured in the 1960s (French, 2000). Foster et al. (2005) believe that school counsellors' professional identities as well as their daily activities have advanced extensively since the beginning of the profession. These authors conducted a study in the United States to determine exactly what it is that school counsellors do, and to provide empirical information about the role of school counsellors. Surveys answered by 526 National Certified Counsellors with a wide range of educational and experiential backgrounds indicate that the participants are currently performing work activities such as general school counselling, facilitating the development of decision-making skills, identifying support system for students, encouraging healthy lifestyle choices and planning and running classroom guidance lessons. Participants rated personal and social growth of students, helping their students progress from school into adulthood, and academic and career development as important (Foster et al., 2005).

The National Education Policy Act of 1967 makes provision for guidance and counselling in schools but psychological services are still a rare phenomenon in South African schools. Psychological services in general involve counselling on personal, education and career matters and also include psychological, therapeutic and remedial services (Naicker, 1994).

In the school where this study was conducted, a clinical psychologist is employed on a full-time basis. Students have the opportunity to make an appointment with the psychologist during the school day to talk about the problems they might be experiencing. There is also a Peer Support Group

(PSG) which consists of 18 grade 11 students that have been trained in basic counselling skills to support their peers.

In the 21st century, school psychology in the United States will expand to meet the needs of students, parents, teachers, and administrators as and those of schools, clinics, hospitals and independent private practice. School psychology training programmes will also take on increasing responsibility regarding change for children and youth in schools (French & Swerdlik, 2000). Ross, Powell and Elias (2002) claim that, in the United States at present, behaviour patterns established during childhood cause the most serious health and social problems. Behaviours included here are the use of substances, sexual behaviours that increase the risk for sexually transmitted diseases or unplanned pregnancy and risk behaviours causing intentional or unintentional harm to self or others. Furthermore, these authors argue that all of these behaviours are all preventable with the successful development of certain skills, including (Ross et al., 2002):

- Thoughtful decision-making
- Understanding signs of one's own and other's feelings
- Listening accurately
- Communicating effectively
- Respecting differences.

The school system can be utilized to reach children with basic and crucial life lessons and to develop important skills they may not obtain otherwise. The basic mission of schools – to prepare young people to function effectively as citizens within a society – is directly related to these lessons. In this sense, the school psychologist's skills are invaluable in an environment such as a school, which is dedicated to making social and emotional skill development a priority for students and even staff (Ross et al., 2002). Peers supporting each other can also be an invaluable concept as peers play such an important role in adolescence.

The importance of peer relationships and social support

One of the main aspects of a child's development that has been recognized in the psychological literature since the 1930s is the importance of peer relationships in childhood. Research clearly indicates that successful interactions with peers corresponds significantly with vital developmental accomplishment that predicts long-term life adjustment (Louw et al., 1998; Menna & Ruck, 2004; Ross et al., 2002).

Social relationships are important for students for the following reasons (Snell & Janney (2000):

- Social relationships add quality to our lives.
- In various daily routines social interaction skills are needed.
- In various cases social relationships are a major motivation for attending school, holding jobs and making positive contributions in life.
- There is a positive relationship between social competence and an absence of problem behaviour.

Adolescents prefer talking about their problems with their peers. Visser (2004) stresses that because peers are all in the same situation, supportive peer relationships can promote the sharing of knowledge and experiences, provide role models, and enhance healthy coping skills. Where young people are sources of reference for one another, a peer support system can have an especially encouraging impact. Adolescents will openly discuss sexual practices, drug-taking and emotional reactions with their peers rather than with adults as they identify more with their peers. Also, if they see liked and trusted peers are changing their behaviour, they are more likely to change their own behaviour (Visser, 2004).

When they do seek help, adolescents prefer informal resources such as friends or family, rather than formal resources such as school counsellors, social workers, teachers and therapists. Adolescents may prefer seeking help from informal sources, as this type of support is of a casual nature.

Adolescents may also not perceive this as an act of help-seeking as informal sources are familiar (Mattheus, 2002; Menna & Ruck, 2004).

During adolescence, the peer group's importance increases even more, as adolescents prefer talking to informal sources of support, such as friends. In the next section peer support groups as an informal source of support are explored in more detail.

Peer support groups

Peer support groups can also form part of support systems in schools. The functions and definitions of peer support groups vary but peer supporters can essentially be described as people who have the ability to listen to other members of the peer group and lead them to problem-solving and effective decision-making (Mattheus, 2002).

As a form of primary prevention, peer support can address emotional and behavioural problems before the problems become severe. Thus, a culture is created where young people may ask for help if they need it and this can contribute to a more caring climate in schools. Young people can be empowered to take ownership of their own well-being and to take the initiative in dealing with some of the problems they experience, which in turn contributes to a sense of increased self-worth amongst young people (Visser, 2004).

Problems interfere with adolescents' need to learn and accomplish things. Ellis, Small-McGinley and De Fabrizio (2001) argue that having someone to talk to gives them relief and comfort, which makes them more available to those activities. Peer support programmes give more students someone to talk to and, additionally, peer support members themselves learn how to be good listeners and helpful people in conflict resolution. Some students experience long-term difficulties in their lives that can become major concerns that they carry with them all day long. Without having someone to talk to, the adolescent may withdraw or show signs of "acting out behaviour",

which may adversely affect their schoolwork. Ellis et al. (2001) therefore assert that having a sympathetic person to share one's troubles with gives comfort and relief and it also frees the student to get on with his or her day in a constructive way.

By integrating an effective peer support system into schools, adolescents are given the opportunity to find comfort and relief in dealing with their problems, as an opportunity is created for them to turn to one of their peers. Peer support is still a relatively new concept across the world, but when implemented effectively it can have a number of possibilities and benefits for adolescents.

Tracing the history of peer support

Cartwright (2005) points out that in centuries of worldwide history and literature we find people supporting and helping their peers. In North America in the 1960s, peer support began as a formal process and developed into a worldwide movement. The origins of peer support can be found in humanistic psychology where it evolved from the group dynamics and existentialism of the West and secular humanism of the East. Carl Rogers' person-centred counselling and Harvey Jackin's Re-evaluation Counselling (RC) are two applications of this psychology. Beyond the field of growth centres and professional counselling, Jackin's co-counselling movement developed worldwide peer counselling networks (Cartwright, 2005).

Peer support practices and networks have either followed or simultaneously developed, developing peer support into a movement. This movement offers a range of structured models that assist a person in finding safe and satisfying solutions to problems. The peer mentoring movement has grown in Canada and the USA since the 1970s, while peer counselling and mediation were emerging in Europe in the mid-1980s, mostly in educational settings. In Australia, similar practices were emerging and, at present, these practices are established in a number of institutions and settings across the

world. They involve young people in schools in helping other students learn and develop emotionally, socially or academically with the purpose of reaching their full potential. A major benefit is that empathy, understanding and practical support can resolve a wide range of problems, without students being referred to teachers or other professionals (Cartwright, 2005).

In 1985, Netta Cartwright was the first teacher in the United Kingdom to introduce peer counselling by teaching Re-evaluation Counselling (RC) at Walton High School in Stafford. In 35 schools throughout the Midlands and London, from primary schools through to special schools and pupil referral units, Cartwright adapted this model to set up peer support systems between 1990 and 2005 (Cartwright, 2005).

In South Africa, limited information on peer support groups is available. Mattheus (2002) shows that peer supporters in South Africa are usually formally trained and function under the supervision of a person who has a psychology background. Training is focused on the following aspects (Mattheus, 2002):

- Qualities and skills: effective listening skills and insight into problems
- Friendship and support
- Support and advice in decision-making
- Support as tutor and academic assistance to peers who struggle with academic demands
- Knowledge of educational, vocational and health aspects
- Role modelling
- Mediation and conflict management
- Problem-solving skills
- Referral skills
- Collection of information.

Across the world more and more schools are recognizing the importance of peer support groups and are starting to implement them in their own systems. In South Africa, schools are also in the process of

implementing peer support systems. Nonetheless, it is not a permanent and successful fixture in every school in the country as it is still a foreign concept to many educators. Later in this chapter research on peer support groups in South Africa is explored in more detail.

Definition and key features of peer support

Snell and Janney (2000) define peer support as

Actions taken by individuals of the same age that involve lending emotional and social sustenance or assistance to each other in a reciprocal unidirectional manner. The form of these supports may vary according to the age, gender, and cultural group of individuals involved and also according to the manner in which the individuals communicate. The function of the support may also vary in that it can be directed toward physical care, entertainment, learning or tutoring, emotional comfort and so forth. (p. 3)

In the school where this study was undertaken, the organizers of the Peer Support Group (PSG) base their programme on this definition. The peer support programme in this school is described in more detail in chapter 3.

The following are key features of peer support, identified by Cowie and Wallace (2000):

- Outside of friendship groups young people are trained to work together, which reduces prejudice and fosters trust across gender and ethnic groups.
- Through training, young people are given opportunities to learn good communication skills, to share information and to reflect on their own emotions in relationships with others.
- Dealing with conflict and helping peers to relate to one another in a more constructive, non-violent way are what young people are trained to deal with.

The ideal in a peer support system is to get people to work together, no matter what their race, religion or gender. When training to be a peer supporter, you have an opportunity to learn new skills and to be in touch with your own experiences, feelings and thoughts. In this way, the peer supporter and the person in need of support benefit through this process.

Supervision of peer supporters

Supervision is described as “the act of reflecting on one’s work with the help of peers and/or someone with more experience and training in the work” (Cowie & Wallace, 2000, p. 133).

Cowie and Wallace (2000) and Cartwright (2005) emphasize the importance of regular supervision for peer supporters. These authors have researched a wide range of peer support services and have found this to be one of the most fundamental factors. Naylor and Cowie (in Cowie & Wallace, 2000), recommend that:

All schools need to ensure that the peer supporters are provided with frequent and regular opportunities for being debriefed about their supporting experiences. In other words, there needs to be recognition that the peer supporters themselves need continual support from the teachers if they are to be successful in their own supporting roles. (p. 133)

Cowie and Wallace (2000) distinguish between two alternatives for peer support supervision, namely group supervision (facilitated by an adult supervisor) and individual supervision (with an adult supervisor). There are advantages and disadvantages to each alternative, as indicated below.

Group supervision has the following advantages (Cowie & Wallace, 2000):

- Group members can assist one another to find answers to problems.
- The supervisor can use his or her time economically as several peer supporters are supervised simultaneously.
- The peer supporters learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses.
- Group cohesiveness develops which can sustain the peer supporters through difficult times.
- The peer supporters have the opportunity to practise their skills by doing roleplays of difficult situations.

Group supervision has the following disadvantages (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998):

- In a group setting, individuals may not always get what they need (e.g. enough time to discuss cases).
- Confidentiality of both the clients and the supervisees is less protected in groups.
- "Between-member competition" and "scapegoating" can hamper learning.
- Too much time may be spent on irrelevant issues.

Individual supervision has the following advantages (Cowie & Wallace, 2000):

- The particular needs of the individual peer supporter are suited when using individual supervision.
- The peer supporter can experience one-to-one support, which models an interaction that reflects the one the peer supporter offers to people who come to him or her for help.
- Peer supporters might feel that they are more attended to and supported which makes them more confident in their skills.
- The peer supporter might be more honest about difficulties that he or she is experiencing in his or her support work.

The following are disadvantages of individual supervision (Martin, 2003):

- Confidentiality may be difficult to uphold as client issues are discussed with a supervisor.
- The boundaries between the client, supervisee (or peer supporter) and supervisor are not always clearly defined.
- It places time demands on the supervisor which may have financial implications for him or her.

Supervision in any form has advantages and disadvantages for peer supporters. On the one hand, it creates an opportunity for them to voice their concerns about cases they deal with, within a safe and private environment. This is important for the well-being of peer supporters. On the other hand, supervision can also have its disadvantages if not managed effectively.

The nature of peer support

The nature of peer support has evolved somewhat over time and, particularly in the United Kingdom, it is now an important part of both primary and secondary schools. Peer support can take a number of forms, two of which are discussed here.

- Peer counselling

Initial types of peer support in the United Kingdom were grounded in a counselling model for bystanders of bullying. A qualified counsellor or psychologist trained bystanders in the role of pupil helpers who would be able to use active listening skills to support peers in distress. At this stage, the aims were to give bystanders the skills to deal with peers' interpersonal issues, to help the victims of bullying and to challenge pupils who bully. A vital aspect was regular supervision, either by a qualified counsellor or by the teacher who managed the peer support scheme. Just as counsellors see their clients in a private consultation, peer counsellors would see users of the

service in a specific room identified specifically for this purpose (Cowie & Hutson, 2005).

The founder of peer counselling, Netta Cartwright, was a school counsellor at a Midlands secondary school in the United Kingdom. Here, she trained students in basic listening and co-counselling skills as a critical part of the school's anti-bullying policy. A person-centred approach called Re-evaluation Counselling (RC) was the theory behind Cartwright's training. RC offers that the difficulties that adolescents experience in the process of growing up in a society organized around inequality, prejudice and demands to compete and conform, impairs our ability to think and function well. However, through a release process (that includes laughing, crying, raging, shaking, trembling and animated talk), everyone has the natural ability to recover from the effects of the difficulties that they have experienced. When we release our distress through re-evaluation of self and others, healing takes place. During Cartwright's training of groups of peer supporters over the years, students reported that they felt safer, whether or not they actually used the service, and a more positive culture and climate developed in the school (Cowie & Hutson, 2005).

- Befriending

Cowie and Hutson (2005) contend that peer counselling services have developed over time into befriending/buddying schemes. Befrienders are trained in active listening skills and a person-centred approach but the approach is much more informal in its implementation. Peer supporters themselves have often shifted to the informal approach, as they report that both they and the users of the schemes find the formal counselling approach difficult and prefer the anonymity of an informal befriending scheme. Teachers select befrienders, who are usually same-age peers or older pupils, on the basis of their friendly personal qualities. Sometimes, existing befrienders form part of the selection and interviewing of volunteers. Training in interpersonal skills, including active listening, assertiveness and leadership, usually takes place (Cowie & Hutson, 2005; Mattheus, 2002). Studies of

befriending indicate a number of advantages (Cowie & Hutson, 2005; Cowie & Sharp, 1996):

- Being befriended is crucial in helping vulnerable pupils to feel more positive about themselves.
- These pupils have an opportunity to voice their feelings about distressing aspects of their lives.
- Befrienders reported that they also benefit from the helping process; they experience more self-confidence and they learn to value other people more.
- Reports from teachers show that the school environment becomes safer and more caring and peer relationships improve in general.

Peer counselling is similar to professional therapy. Nevertheless, Cox (1999) believes that the difference between peer counselling and professional therapy is that the former is done by a lay person so that the helping process that the peer counsellor uses differs considerably from that used by a professional therapist. Peer counsellors should only know when and how to appropriately refer a client to a professional therapist. Other differences include the following (Cox, 1999):

- Peer counsellors deal with a more diverse group of client needs than most professional therapists.
- Peer counsellors see or talk with clients on a short-term basis while professional therapists usually see clients as many times as needed.
- In peer counselling the client's childhood is not explored and there is no tampering with defences the client uses to deal with unconscious conflicts.

Peer support can take on a number of forms. Whether it is peer counselling for bystanders of bullying, befriending or an approach similar to professional therapy, there is a single aim – to support peers in distress.

Being a peer supporter can be beneficial to peer supporters themselves but also has its disadvantages.

Peer support in action

Advantages for peer supporters

Cowie (in Cowie & Wallace, 2000) conducted research in nine schools in the United Kingdom where peer support systems had been well established for at least one year as part of a school anti-bullying policy. Included in the systems were informal befriending schemes, a conflict resolution scheme and counselling-based schemes. During interviews conducted with the peer helpers, all of them, without exception, reported that they experienced immense personal benefits through their involvement with their peers. The research shows 60% reported that these benefits develop directly from the interpersonal skills gained and teamwork during training. The peer helpers gained more self-confidence, a sense of responsibility and a belief that they were contributing positively to the life of the school community. Of these peer helpers, 63% believed that the service impacted on the school as a whole. Other peer supporters stated that school was turning into a place where it was becoming more and more acceptable to talk about emotional and relationship issues. Peer helpers also indicated that they appreciated the opportunity of addressing a real problem in their school community and being given the skills and structures to tackle it (Cowie & Wallace, 2000).

Another peer support program was implemented at Fort Saskatchewan Junior High in Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta, from 1996-1998. The researchers conducted group interviews with the peer supporters about their experiences and they reported the following (Ellis et al., 2001):

- Communication skills and knowledge were acquired.
- Conflict mediation skills and knowledge were acquired.
- Their success regarding the projects motivated them to do more and to continue with such projects after they left school.

- The strength of a team was experienced and valued.
- It made them feel good to help others and get them to join in the helping.
- Their activities provided benefits for individual students, the student body and the community beyond the school.
- A number of personal benefits were experienced, including increased self-esteem, self-confidence, responsibility, approachability, more friends, and a feeling of involvement in the school.

Naylor and Cowie (in Cowie & Hutson, 2005) questioned peer supporters, groups of service users or potential users, teachers involved in managing the systems and a sample of teachers not involved in running the systems. They found that peer supporters welcomed the idea of addressing a real problem in their school community and being taught how to deal with it. A boy peer supporter responded as follows (Cowie & Hutson, 2005):

We go into the dining room with Year 7s (age 11-12) and we keep an eye out even though we are not on duty. We just look and if we see anyone upset we go and talk to them, or we start up a conversation, like, even if they are not upset. We start a conversation, you know, just how are you finding the school. (p. 43)

Peer supporters take a positive view on the value of the communication skills they were taught in their training. All the peer supporters asserted that there were immense personal benefits for them through their involvement in the schemes. A rewarding sense of responsibility was another commonly mentioned benefit, as mentioned by one girl peer supporter: “My Dad seems really proud for what I am doing because he knows that I’ve helped someone and if he knows I’ve helped one person, he knows I can help other people” (Cowie & Hutson, 2005, p. 43).

In the study by Ellis et al. (2001) most of the peer supporters spontaneously voiced their satisfaction in helping to make the school a safer

place. They also reported that they were proud of being able to make changes to the systems on the basis of their experience. A comment that was made many times was that the experience of being a peer supporter had led them to decide on one of the caring professions for a career (Cowie & Hutson, 2005).

Cowie et al. (2002) investigated how school peer support systems, studied two years earlier in a survey, had evolved. In all, 413 pupils (actual and potential users of the systems) aged 13-14 and 15-16, 34 teachers in charge of systems and 80 peer supporters in 35 secondary schools were interviewed using structured schedules for the pupils and semi-structured ones for the teachers and peer supporters. The interviews were focused on the respondents' perceptions and experiences of the school's peer support system.

The researchers noticed that peer supporters in their study had changed over time. Transformations in confidence and growing identity as peer supporters were present. There were variations in the scope and degree of help that the peer supporters received from others, including the quality of teacher facilitation, parental approval, the extent and relevance of training and debriefing groups and feedback from other pupils, whether users or potential users. Gender identity was an issue for some of the boy peer supporters while others found compatibility between the peer supporter's role and being "manly". Each peer supporter's individual efforts had to be co-ordinated with guidance from other peer supporters, while at the group level each peer supporter was directed through training and practices developed by previous peer supporters. Links with other systems included external training agencies (e.g. ChildLine), pressure groups (e.g. the Peer Support Forum), and higher education (e.g. a university-based research project) (Cowie & Hutson, 2005).

Abu-Rasain and Williams (1999) applied peer counselling/support to the Arabic culture. The project started from a zero baseline, as there is no history of peer counselling in Saudi Arabia. A study was conducted in a boys' secondary school in Saudi Arabia over an academic year. Aims of this study

included supporting individual pupils, improving the social environment and reducing loneliness. The researchers made use of school records, interviews, questionnaires, standard psychological tests and focus groups, in order to assess the impact. The findings show that there was no change over the period in loneliness, but there was a significant positive change in two social provisions (guidance and reliable alliance), as well as a reduction in problems presented to the school counsellor. Teaching staff were unsupportive of the programme but clients valued the service and peer counsellors themselves profited through increased self-esteem.

Disadvantages for peer supporters

A number of studies have simultaneously highlighted the existence of problems in the running of peer support systems. Cowie and Olafsson (in Cowie et al., 2002) found that sharing power with young people was difficult for some adults and some aggressive school environments undermine the work of peer supporters. Hostility on the part of some peers was identified by Naylor and Cowie (in Cowie et al., 2002). This hostility includes “hoax calls and referrals”, “adverse comments”, “jealousy at all the attention” (p. 456) or doubts about the capacity of the service to offer help. Potential users could be prevented from seeking help from peer supporters because of fear of ridicule or contempt from others.

From the above it is clear that the advantages for peer supporters outnumber the disadvantages. The reason for this might be that there is a lack of research on disadvantages for peer supporters; it might be that all these studies focus on the positive and not so much on the negative aspects surrounding peer support; or it might just be that the benefits for peer supporters outweigh the shortcomings when a peer support programme is implemented effectively.

Research on peer support in South Africa

As mentioned before, research on peer support in South Africa and peer support programmes in South African schools is scarce. Few researchers have attempted to explore this phenomenon.

Visser (2004) implemented a peer support project in 13 schools with pupils from a disadvantaged background, using a social-ecological, systems and social construction theory as a theoretical guide in action research. The study found that the project as it functioned during the first two years was mainly driven by the enthusiasm and energy of the peer supporters, a few committed teachers and groups of student facilitators. The peer supporters' enthusiasm and commitment resulted in learners sharing personal experiences with them. For the research it was important that each person had to become aware of his or her own role, give personal meaning to it, interact with others to develop a shared meaning and give life to that role in a complex system of interaction.

Mattheus (2002) conducted a literature and empirical, qualitative study in a South African high school. The aim was to explore and describe the experiences of a peer support group in terms of their knowledge, skills, competence and training. The peer supporters in this study were approached with problems that included relationship difficulties between boys and girls, peer pressure, competition between friends, bullying by peers, conflict between parents (divorce, separation) and conflict with teachers. Other problems were personal loss due to death or divorce or relocation, substance abuse, rape, teenage depression, suicide, feelings of rejection, sexual development, self-concept, attention-seeking behaviour, academic pressure and pressure to perform in other areas (e.g. sport or extra-curricular activities). However, this study indicates that these peer supporters did not find themselves competent enough to handle serious problems (such as HIV/Aids infection or teenage pregnancy) effectively but rather viewed themselves as adequate enough to handle minor problems, the reason for this being inadequate supervision.

Conclusion

Peer group relations become very important and are an integral part of an adolescent's social development. This interpersonal contact outside of the family can be a source of comfort and belonging but it can also be a source of conflict for the adolescent. Taking this into account, it makes sense to assume that having important people with whom they can identify (i.e. their peers) to support them throughout this growing and changing era, can be beneficial.

Peer support groups are a fast growing fixture in high schools. As noted above, international and local research has shown that peer support may have great benefits for both the peer supporters and the people who make use of their services. As with any system peer support also has its problems and many times people do not take this service seriously or feel threatened by it.

Many studies, as noted above, deal with the effectiveness of a peer support system and this is measured in a quantitative way. Qualitative research in terms of experiences, feelings and thoughts of peer supporters is scarce and lacking both locally and internationally. One very important aspect, namely the well-being of peer supporters, is not given sufficient coverage in the research. Clearly there is a need to approach research in a more qualitative way and to focus more on peer supporters than the effectiveness of the system. This study makes an exploratory attempt to start addressing this lack and the scarcity of information. In the next chapter the researcher describes in more detail how and from where this study was conducted.

CHAPTER 3

A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO RESEARCH

Stories matter. So do stories about stories.

Clifford Geertz (in Freedman & Combs, 1996, p.19)

This study adopts a postmodern, social constructionist viewpoint. Narrative psychology falls within the domain of this perspective. In this chapter, the post-modernist worldview is discussed, followed by social constructionism and lastly narrative psychology as a subdivision of social constructionism. The researcher then reflects on how this relates to the study.

With the above-mentioned in mind, the implications for research and the research approach are explained in detail and the process described.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism encourages fractured, fluid and multiple perspectives. It is a self-reflective and critical epistemology that is not a theory or a set of ideas as much as it is a form of questioning, an attitude or a perspective (Sey, 1999).

Multiple perspectives and reflection are encouraged in this study. The researcher explores the experiences of three peer supporters as well as her own experience throughout the research process.

Agger (1991) asserts that a postmodern social theory would involve examining the social world from the multiple perspectives of class, race, gender and other identifying group associations. It refuses the totalising claims of grand narratives. Furthermore, postmodernism claims that every knowledge is contextualized by its historical and cultural nature. This means that a universal social science is considered impossible because we cannot measure people's and groups' different subject positions against each other –

postmodernism rejects the view that science can be spoken in a singular universal voice. In this study, multiple perspectives of peer supporter experiences are explored. Postmodernism asserts that there is no singular universal voice of a peer supporter (Agger, 1991), rather that every peer supporter will inevitably have his or her own collection of experiences.

The post-modernist worldview, according to Freedman and Combs (1996), is based on four assumptions, namely, realities are socially constructed, realities are constituted through language, realities are organized and maintained through narrative and there are no essential truths.

Realities are socially constructed

Aspects that make up the psychological fabric of “reality” (i.e. beliefs, laws, social customs, habits of dress and diet) occur through social interaction as time passes. As people live their realities, they construct them together. The participants constructed their reality as peer supporters through their experiences as peer supporters, as well as through their thoughts and feelings around them.

In the way that any social group constructs and maintains its knowledge concerning reality, three processes are significant and a fourth one encompasses the overall process of which the other three are parts (Freedman & Combs, 1996):

- a) Typification – the process through which people sort their perceptions into types or classes, e.g. sorting people into classes like ‘Christians’ and ‘Baptists’. In this study three high school students were marked as peer supporters and all the other students could identify them as such.
- b) Institutionalisation – the process through which institutions arise around sets of typifications, e.g. the institution of motherhood/law or social class. This would include the institution of peer support groups.
- c) Legitimation – processes that give legitimacy to the institutions and typifications of a specific society, e.g. writing a book, publishing it and

someone reading it, are all acts of legitimation for the institution of narrative therapy. Acts of legitimation around peer support groups would include volunteers going through a selection process and once they are selected, being trained as PSG members.

- d) Reification – the result of the combined processes of typification, institutionalisation and legitimation, e.g. facts of nature or in this study, the tradition of the PSG in the school.

Realities are constituted through language

Societies construct their views of realities in language. People can only know the worlds we share in language. Language is not a passive receiving of pre-existing truths, rather it is an interactive process. Our language informs us how to observe the world and what to see in the world. We bring forth a reality every time we speak. Change, therefore, would involve a change in language and language is constantly changing. A word by itself does not carry meaning, rather the word in relation to its context carries the meaning, and no two contexts will be exactly similar (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

The participants describe their experiences as peer supporters as positive but draining (chapters 4, 5 and 6). The perceptions of what peer supporters do among other students in the school differ from the participants', though. Other students conceptualise the peer support group as being an aspect of status and claim that the peer supporters join this group for their own benefit and not for the benefit of others. In this regard, the words in relation to their context carry the meaning, a meaning that differs among students and peer supporters.

Having conversations with the participants gives the researcher an interactive opportunity to experience the reality of the peer supporters and how they create meaning within this reality.

Realities are organized and maintained through narrative

The language we use creates the realities we live in, therefore, the stories that we live and tell keep the realities alive and pass them along. Stories inform our lives and they can hold us together or keep us apart. We live in the great stories of our culture. It is through stories that we live our lives. Through stories, people make sense of their lives. They make sense of the cultural narratives that they are born into as well as the personal narratives they construct in relation to the cultural narratives (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

The stories as told by the participants are passed along and therefore maintained in the process of sharing with the researcher. Their personal narratives also become part of a larger narrative, a research narrative.

There are no essential truths

We cannot objectively know reality; we can only interpret experience. Any given experience can be interpreted in various ways, but no interpretation is “really” true. There are no “essential” truths within the multiple stories and within the multiple possibilities of the postmodern “multiverse”. Through language “selves” are socially constructed and these “selves” are maintained in narrative. In different contexts different selves originate and no one self is truer than any other (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

The researcher can only interpret the experiences of the participants. The interpretations given here are not necessarily “essentially true”. They are only the stories of the participants as told by the researcher. There are many other possible versions of how the stories told here can be interpreted.

These stories as told by the participants and the researcher are socially constructed within narratives.

Social constructionism

In social constructionism people create their realities together and meaning is created between people, in relationships.

According to Papert (1991) constructionism means that

The learner [student of constructionism] is consciously engaged in constructing a public entity, whether it's a sandcastle on the beach or a theory of the universe... If one eschews pipeline models of transmitting knowledge in talking among ourselves...then one must expect that I will not be able to tell you about my idea of constructionism. Doing so is bound to trivialize it. Instead, I must confine myself to engage you in experiences (including verbal ones) liable to encourage your own personal construction of something in some sense like it. Only in this way will there be something rich enough in your mind to be worth talking about (p. 1).

The researcher and the participants verbally engaged in conversations around experiences of the participants, encouraging their personal constructions. As Papert (1991) states, this is the only way something rich enough is created that is worth talking about.

From a social constructionist point of view descriptions of the world occur within shared systems of intelligibility (usually a spoken language or written texts) (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). This is also the case in this study, as accounts of the participants' experiences are explored within dialogue and transcripts. Instead of being regarded as the external expression of the speaker's internal processes (such as cognition, intention), they are seen as an expression of relationships among people. Thus, language is created, maintained and discarded within social interaction with the emphasis not on the individual mind, but rather on the meanings that people create as they

construct descriptions and explanations in language together (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). In this sense, meaning is created within the relationships between the researcher and the participants. Furthermore, knowledge forms part of individuals' coordinated activities. These activities are utilized to bring about "locally-agreed-upon purposes concerning the real and the good" (Gergen & Gergen, 1991, p. 78). Thus, rather than being on independence, the focus is on inter-dependence.

From the social constructionist viewpoint, Gergen and Gergen (1991) contend that the researcher becomes part of the outward, fuller sphere of shared languages. By attempting to explore the experiences of the participants the researcher was invited into the fuller realm of the participants, where the reflexive attempt, according to Gergen and Gergen (1991), is relational and the emphasis is on the development of the languages of understanding. The aims of social constructionism include realizing the linguistic implications of preferred positions entirely as well considering and utilizing the expression of alternative voices or perspectives (Gergen & Gergen, 1991).

Concerning the aims of this study, the researcher makes use of what Gergen and Gergen (1991, p. 86) refer to as "expanding understanding through relational reflexivity". The sharing of power between researchers and subjects in order to construct meaning is the primary aspect of this type of work. This entails "subjects" becoming "participants" and the number of interpretations constructed in the research is expanded. The researcher or observer takes responsibility for his or her observations, descriptions and explanations (Steier, 1991). The researcher's description of the experiences of the participants is but one "truth" and can be interpreted in various ways. It is also not static but rather flexible and can therefore be expanded in many different directions.

Meanings are created and constructed within spoken or written conversations and in relationships. The researcher is inevitably part of the research process and in this study the researcher and participants construct

meaning together. The narratives or stories of the participants and the researcher constitute the meaning created in the research process.

Narrative psychology

Stories exist all around us. We create meaning for ourselves by sharing our stories. Botella (1994) believes that narrative psychology uses the metaphor of the self as a personal narrative. He refers to narrative psychology as self-narratives and maintains that in the construction of meaning, the basic psychological act is the creation of a metaphor. He goes on to say that a valuation is the basic building block of a self-narrative, and a valuation in this sense is “any unit of meaning that has positive, negative or ambivalent value in the eyes of the individual” (Botella, 1994, p.2). The narratives of the participants describe their experiences and through these narratives meaning is created that is only valid for the participant.

Morgan (2000) asserts that we are interpreting beings and we experience events that we want to make meaningful. Through linking certain events together in a specific sequence over time, we create the stories we have about our lives and we strive to find a way of explaining or making sense of them. We are constantly giving meanings to our experiences as we live our lives. Morgan (2000, p. 5) states that a narrative is “like a thread that weaves the events together, forming a story”.

In this way the participants link certain experiences together to create their own stories as peer supporters. These stories are constructed in such a way that they give meaning to their experiences as peer supporters. Each of their stories is unique and relative as each of them is unique and cannot experience the same situation in exactly the same way.

Gergen and Gergen (1993) contend that we tell comprehensive stories about everything in our lives and that we use these stories to identify ourselves to others and to ourselves. We tell our lives as stories and our relationships with each other are expressed in narrative form. Hardy (1968)

(in Gergen & Gergen, 1993, p. 5) writes, “we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative”.

Everything that happens in our lives can be linked together and seen as stories. Narrative accounts are embedded within social action and through narratives rendered socially visible. Characteristically, these events are then used to establish expectations for future events and they become laden with a storied sense because of the immersion of narrative in the events of daily life. Events, like stories, have a beginning, a climax, a low point and an ending, and people will live out the events in such a way that they and others will guide them in just this way (Gergen & Gergen, 1993).

Steier (1991, p. 164) submits that “we create our research worlds through stories as experiences that are, whether fictive or factive, ways that guide us towards marking some ‘streams of life’ as noticeable while leaving others as background”. The broader stories of the culture in which we live influence the way in which we understand our lives. These events that occur in a sequence across time do not take place in a vacuum – a context always exists in which the stories of our lives are created. This context adds to the interpretations and meanings that we give to events. Influential contributors to the plot of the stories by which we live include the context of gender, race, class, culture and sexual preference (Morgan, 2000).

From a social constructionist viewpoint, through relations with others narratives or stories are linked together to create meaning and assist us in identifying ourselves.

Relating the study to social constructionism

This research study is but a collection of stories. These stories are personal accounts of what it is like being a peer supporter and are constructed by the researcher and by the participants. This means that each participant and the researcher created a story that has a beginning, middle

and an end. The participants' and the researcher's experiences set in motion the construction of their stories.

Furthermore, the participants' and the researcher's stories form part of a larger social discourse and a broader story that is peer support. The history and nature of peer support discussed in Chapter 2 can be seen as discourses that were co-constructed by the researcher and other researchers. Peer support in this study is explored from various points of views, including the researcher's and the participants'. The stories the participants tell of peer support and how they are constructed constitute the discourses that they create. Burman (1994, p. 2) uses the term "discourse" to refer to "socially organised frameworks of meaning that define categories and specify domains of what can be said and done".

Finally, adolescence is a social construction and a discourse in itself. Burman (1994) argues that discourses of childhood (or adolescence for the purposes of this study) are fundamental when the ways in which we structure our own and others' sense of place and position are considered. Cultural narratives define who we are, why we are the way we are and where are we going. These cultural narratives are the larger discourse of which the discourses of childhood form part (Burman, 1994).

Most textbooks on developmental psychology depict a chronological format from conception to adolescence or to death (Burman, 1994). In this study, adolescence is identified as that developmental stage between childhood and adulthood and three different stages (early, mid and late adolescence) are described (see Chapter 2). This is how society constructs adolescence and also how adolescence is constructed in this study. Peer relations and peer support are constructed within adolescence as this is the time period when peer interactions become significant to the adolescent. Another social construction is formed in the latter sentence: society constructs the idea that peers are an important part of the adolescent years and that problems arise when successful peer relations are not established. Burman (1994) claims that the developmental psychology domain is a

modern, Western construction, which is under constant revision itself. These constructions of adolescence are kept alive by society while the constructions of peer support groups are kept alive by the school and the stories people tell.

Implications of social constructionism for research

In this study the social constructionist/narrative worldview is used in such a way that the outcome consists of the relevant narratives and meanings that were constructed and co-constructed throughout the research process; in other words, the stories as they were told by the participants, and the story as told by the researcher.

As meaning is constructed socially, we need to make sense of our lives in the context of our social history, shaping stories about the groups we belong to and about how we came to be who, how and what we are. We need to understand other people's backgrounds in order to make sense of how other people understand their lives (Drewery & Winslade, 1997). By conducting interviews, focus groups and journaling throughout the research process, the researcher can try to make sense of how the participants understand their lives.

From my (the researcher's) point of view I cannot objectively know the participants' reality; I can only interpret experience, but as my (or anyone else's) "interpretation" will not be "really true", I can describe the process and the reader can in turn construct the process from his or her own point of view.

Research context

The study was conducted at an upper-class private high school in Gauteng, South Africa. At present the school has about 500 students from grade 8 to grade 12. As it is an academic school, academic performance is the main priority for students and for the school. It is therefore also a very competitive school in terms of academic performance.

In the first year of my master's studies, our group of master's students were invited to the school to support the PSG during a certain task that they had to perform. Earlier that week a student had committed suicide and the PSG had to do crisis intervention with the grade 9s. Each of the PSG members was assigned to a small group of grade 9 students. Their task was to talk about what had happened, and about the students' thoughts and feelings around this incident. Our task, as master's students, was to support the PSG member if he or she were to have difficulty in managing the process.

This experience made me interested in peer support groups in general. In my opinion at that stage, they had an important purpose in the school – supporting their peers. I saw how useful and meaningful it is to have a group like this in a school, but I wondered about the PSG members themselves and decided to research experiences of the PSG members for my dissertation.

A discussion I had with the school psychologist and the school principal confirmed my decision. Through these conversations a history of the PSG in this specific school was constructed which provided a background and a foundation for my research.

In the school, the organizers of the Peer Support Group (PSG) base their programme on Snell and Janney's (2000) definition of peer support affirmed in Chapter 2. A registered psychologist trains the peer supporters in basic listening and communication skills and empathy. The psychologist also then acts as supervisor for the group during their duty year. The peer supporters (or PSG members as they are known in the school) counsel other students before and after school, during break or in free periods. Their purpose as peer supporters is to listen, empathize, support and refer when necessary.

The Peer Support Group (PSG) was implemented in this school by the school psychologist about four years ago. According to the school psychologist and the participants, the peer support programme here works as follows:

- Students from the grade 11 group volunteer and they have to write a paragraph explaining why they want to be on the PSG.
- The rest of the grade 11 group then vote for the volunteers but the school psychologist makes the final decision based on the votes and the written paragraph;
- The chosen PSG members are then trained in basic counselling skills.
- They are required to take an oath of confidentiality in front of the whole school after their initial training is completed.
- They are then sent out into the school where they are expected to be available to anyone who is experiencing emotional, social and/or academic difficulties.
- They are allowed to have conversations with students who require their help before and/or after school, during break and during free periods.
- Two PSG members are employed over each of the grade 8 classes as mentors, to watch over the newcomers and to support them if necessary.
- The school makes use of their services in combination with the school psychologist's, when there is a crisis (for example, a suicide within the school) and they have to support the students on a group basis.
- Throughout the year they receive weekly supervision from the school psychologist.
- They are continually trained in various aspects of basic counselling and educated in relevant issues such as eating disorders and suicide.

Conversations I had with the participants during this study showed that in the school there are certain perceptions, or constructions, created by the students around the PSG. The PSG has a social function in the school and many students want desperately to be selected to the PSG. The reason for this is that the PSG gives an indication of the popular students who will be selected to the executive the following year. Students who are selected to be PSG members therefore have certain expectations about their social status in future.

Research approach

The study is exploratory because the researcher makes preliminary investigations into a research area that is relatively unknown, especially in South Africa. An open and flexible and, to a certain extent, an inductive approach (Babbie & Mouton, 1998; Copi & Cohen, 1994; Durrheim, 1999) is used by attempting to look for new insights into the phenomenon of peer support. An inductive approach, according to Durrheim (1999), entails exploring open questions instead of testing theoretically derived (deductive) hypotheses.

As the researcher intends to answer a question that might be of interest to others (as mentioned in the previous section), applied research (Babbie & Mouton, 1998; Durrheim, 1999) is used in this study. The researcher attempts to provide descriptions of the experiences, thoughts and feelings of three peer supporters that could be of importance to all peer supporters in a school environment, peer supporters in training and trainers of peer supporters. Following Durrheim (1999), the level of generalization only applies to this specific context.

This is a qualitative study, as information in the form of written (stories or narratives) and spoken (individual interviews and focus groups) language was collected. Doing a qualitative study allows the researcher to study this selected issue in openness and detail as I identify and attempt to understand the narratives that emerge from the research material. The aim of the research is to provide rich and thick descriptions of the experiences, thoughts and feelings of three peer supporters. This study is also naturalistic (a real world situation is studied without manipulation and control), holistic (complex system that is more than the sum of its parts) and inductive (immersion in the natural setting) (Babbie & Mouton, 1998; Durrheim, 1999).

Sampling

This research project is conducted from a qualitative, constructionist and exploratory approach to research. Large or random samples were therefore not drawn; rather, three cases were selected on a voluntary basis and studied (Babbie & Mouton, 1998; Durrheim, 1999).

Before any fieldwork was done, certain important criteria were developed that are pertinent to the study, including involving students who are academically strong, as grade 11 is a very important year and I did not want my research project to be a burden to the participants. I therefore wanted to schedule the interviews for times when they were not in the middle of examinations, and to communicate what I expected of them in advance so they would have enough time to plan around their academic work. This narrowed down the research and left me with a small, relatively focused number of potential participants (Babbie & Mouton, 1998), or peer supporters.

In a broader sense, language plays an important part in this study, and in the post-modernist view. As I am fluent in Afrikaans and English, I preferred to carry out this study with students that are also fluent in one or both languages and can adequately express themselves in these languages.

On the PSG camp where training of the PSG members took place, I clearly described my intentions for this research process to all the PSG members. All of them were academically strong (following my criteria) and therefore suited to be participants of this study. I explained that I needed three of them to participate on a voluntary basis and that they should, within a week, decide amongst themselves who those three participants would be. A week after we returned from the camp, three of the PSG members contacted me and the process started.

Collection of research material

An inductive approach to research is used as the study is based on a constructionist and interpretive framework. This means that the researcher investigates and describes emerging narratives and realities within this context, using a social constructionist approach. Durrheim (1999) believes that “reliable” and “objective” measures fit more with quantitative than with qualitative research and that social phenomena are context-dependent while meaning depends on the specific situation that the individual is in. The researcher will be the instrument of observation. The degree to which I, the researcher, can produce observations that are believable for myself, the subjects being studied and the eventual readers of the study, defines validity or rather verification as the concept is known in qualitative research (Durrheim, 1999). Rich and detailed observations of three cases allow me to build up an understanding of the phenomena through observing and listening to specific instances of the phenomena as they emerge in a particular context (Babbie & Mouton, 1998; Durrheim, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Interviews

Three peer supporters were selected on a voluntary basis and two individual unstructured interviews (Schurink, 1998) were conducted during their duty year, in order to gain insight into their experiences, thoughts and feelings. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) contend that from a constructionist approach the interview creates a space in which certain linguistic patterns, such as typical phrases, metaphors, arguments and stories, can arise. An interviewer, however skilled, can never only be a facilitator who permits the interviewee to express his or her feelings and experiences. Meanings created in the interview between the interviewer and interviewee, are co-constructed meanings. The two people involved in the interview create or construct meanings and these meanings are creations of a larger social system in which these individuals communicate (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Furthermore, the researcher makes use of what Kelly (1999b, p. 431) refers to as methodological triangulation which involves the “use of multiple methods to study a single problem, looking for convergent evidence from different sources”. Methodological triangulation is applied in this study by using the individual unstructured interviews together with focus groups and the writing of narratives in order to gain more information and richer descriptions than by using only one of these as a source of information.

Focus groups

Following Kelly (1999a), “focus group” is a general term that applies to a research interview conducted in a group environment. A group of people who do not “naturally” comprise an existing social group but do, however, share a similar type of experience can be referred to as a focus group. Focus groups are useful in the sense that they assist in stimulating new ideas and creating concepts in order to learn more about people’s opinions and experiences. It also allows the researcher to learn more about how people talk and think about the phenomenon concerned (Schurink, Schurink & Poggenpoel, 1998). The purpose of the focus group in this study was therefore to, in an unstructured way, explore the narratives that evolve within a group setting. The focus group consisted of the three participants and two focus groups were conducted during the course of the participants’ duty year.

Journaling

The participants were asked to keep a journal throughout their year as peer supporters. In the journal they could document exactly how and what they experienced, felt and thought in relation to the PSG. They were also encouraged to include anything in the journal that they felt was relevant to the process of growing and evolving as a peer supporter. As journaling can sometimes be difficult to define (what to write and what not), a training

session was carried out with the three participants in which the purpose and focus of journals were discussed.

In this study the research is approached from a narrative perspective, which encourages the sharing (whether verbal or written) of stories or experiences. The researcher therefore also makes use of journaling as a means of expression. Narrative form, whether written or spoken narratives, is considered important given the development of children's capacity to make sense of events in their lives and to evoke meanings. In order to analyse, sort out and understand feelings, thoughts and experiences, children and young people make use of drawings, play and stories (Sharp & Cowie, 1998).

Clinical journaling can be explained as

A subjective and objective written description of cognitive learning experiences, attitudes and feelings that provides an avenue to promote optimal student learning. It links prior knowledge, skill acquisition, decision-making, critical thinking, observation, description, empathy, and/or release of feeling (Ruthman, Jackson, Chuskey, Flannigan, Folse & Bunton, 2004, p. 120).

Journal therapy is defined using one's own thoughts and/or feelings to assist in psychological healing and personal growth. Written expression in the therapeutic process has a significant role as it is a means of emotional expression when interpersonal expression is not possible. Psychological benefits of journaling include integration of emotional conflicts, encouragement of self-awareness, managing behaviour, problem-solving, reducing anxiety and increasing self-esteem. The principle underlying journal writing and other forms of writing therapy is that the mind and the body are inseparably joined in the healing process (Slomski, 2000).

The way journaling is approached in this study constitutes a combination of clinical journaling and journal therapy. One could almost say that the researcher borrowed techniques from both clinical journaling and

journal therapy and integrated them into the study. Techniques borrowed from clinical journaling included the written description of experiences, thoughts and feelings of the peer supporters. This overlaps with techniques from journal therapy, which included purposefully focusing on the thoughts and feelings around the experiences themselves and their effect. In whichever way journaling is done, the fact remains that it is beneficial to the author.

Research conducted by Pennebaker (in Rakel, 2004) shows that people's physical and mental health improves when they put their emotional turmoil into words, either through writing or conversing. This research also shows that when journaling is done once daily for 3-4 consecutive days, the positive effects appear to last for 4-8 months. Journaling can be an especially useful tool for adolescents. According to Wilber (2002), it is a place where adolescents can express themselves and share their thoughts, ideas, memories, secrets dreams, fears and wishes. It helps adolescents understand themselves better and to discover the power of their own voices. By making use of journaling, the participant therefore also gains insight into his or her own experiences, thoughts and feelings.

Wilber's idea does not, however, reflect the exact nature of how journaling was used in this study. The purpose of keeping a journal here was not to include all of the aspects Wilber refers to, but only experiences, thoughts and feelings that surround being a peer supporter.

The reason for conducting the study in this way is to discover the unique personal narratives that constitute the peer supporters' lives. In other words, to understand and reveal the subjective meanings the participants attach to their duty as peer supporters and how they use public and private constructions for making sense of their experiences, feelings and thoughts. From a narrative perspective, I as the researcher cannot take a neutral stand, as this process will inevitably have an impact on me as well. Together the participants and I will co-construct our narratives around peer supporting and reflect on each other's opinions and conceptualizations.

Ethical considerations for the study

Ethical principles

Three ethical principles guided this research study, namely (Babbie & Mouton, 1998; Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999):

- Autonomy

During this study, the researcher respected the autonomy of the participants by addressing issues such as the voluntary and informed consent of the research participants (see Appendix A) and providing space for the participants to withdraw from the process at any time. However, all three participants declined anonymity and gave the researcher permission to use their names. Future considerations are also taken into account, which means that should this study be published, the participants' rights to anonymity will still be respected. In case of publication, the researcher will discuss this matter with the participants and the school and provide opportunity for all parties concerned to reconsider their anonymity.

- Nonmaleficence

No physical, emotional or social harm was inflicted on the research participants.

- Beneficence

The research process was designed in such a way that it may be beneficial to other peer supporters, educators and school counsellors or psychologists.

Ethical guidelines

The researcher makes use of the following ethical guidelines for research set out by Durrheim and Wassenaar (1999) and Strydom (1998):

- Consent

The participants received a verbal and written explanation of their responsibilities, so that they could make an informed choice to voluntarily participate in the research (see Appendix A). As the participants are underage, their parents also received a detailed and clear explanation of the research procedures (see Appendix B). The researcher also obtained informed consent and permission from the school where the research was conducted (see Appendix C).

- Confidentiality

The limits of confidentiality were clearly stipulated in the consent forms and also verbally communicated to the participants. The participants were given the choice to conceal their identities, but all three of them declined. The school, however, wished to remain anonymous. The participants were informed that the interviews and focus groups would be recorded, transcribed and stored in a safe place. Only the researcher and her supervisor would be entitled to read these transcriptions. The researcher only explored issues relevant to the study to reduce the risk of invasion of privacy.

- Competence

The researcher only carried out procedures that she was competent to conduct. The risks in this study were minimal but the researcher was prepared for the possibility that the participants might be reminded of traumatic or difficult incidents that occurred, which might impact on their feelings, thoughts and perceptions. As the researcher is a psychologist in training, she aspired to contain and debrief them if need be. Although the participants mentioned difficult incidents that occurred, there was never a need to debrief them.

- Reporting results

If they wish to do so, the identities of the participants as well as the school will be protected, should this study be published. If the participants and the school decline anonymity, their real names will be used. In such an

event, the research material will not be fabricated or falsified and the limitations of the findings will be pointed out.

Description of the research process

Following Lindegger (1999), the study draws on the narrative analysis method and to some extent the principle of case study research is utilized because the focus is on individuals as individuals, rather than as members of a population. Narrative approaches seek to understand and reveal subjective meanings as well as to discover the unique personal narratives by which people live.

The key principles in this study would be to stay close to the research material in an attempt to understand. I prefer to use the term “research material” rather than the term “data” as I approach my research from a narrative point of view. The purpose is to provide what Morgan (2000) calls a “thick description”. A “thin description” leaves little room for life’s complexities and contradictions and leads to “thin conclusions”, whereas a “thick description” means to richly describe people’s stories and to provide a rich description of lives and relationships (Morgan, 2000).

An account of the researcher’s role, self-reflexivity (Steier, 1991), in constructing this description is also included. It entailed that as the researcher, I too kept a journal of my own experiences, thoughts and feelings that emerged throughout the process. These descriptions are much more than a mere copy of the original phenomenon being studied – the purpose is to place real-life events and phenomena into some kind of perspective. Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999, p. 139) refer to this as making the “strange familiar and the familiar strange”. What this research aims for is a forceful account (i.e. thick descriptions) of the phenomenon being studied – close enough to the context so that other people familiar with the context (i.e. peer supporters) would recognise it as true, but far enough away so that it would help them to see the phenomenon in a new perspective (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999).

Steier (1991, p. 2) defines reflexivity as “bending back on itself” and asserts that as we identify the variety of mutual relationships in which our knowing activities are rooted, reflexivity creates a way in which circularity and self-reference emerge in inquiry. A relationship between language and experience is included here, for example. This relationship allows us to see socially constructed “individual” experience and is also embedded in languaging activities (Steier, 1991).

When all the research material was gathered, I had only a preliminary understanding of the meaning of this material. At this point, I took and immersed myself in all the material again, this time working with texts (field notes, interview and focus group transcripts and written narratives) rather than with lived reality. I entered into a conversation with the texts (“data”) in which new realities were created and instead of analysing the information, I rather described the emerging narratives and realities of the participants and myself. My intention therefore was not to analyse but rather to continue constructing and co-constructing the narratives and building on them, generating richer, thicker descriptions and possibilities. In this process I, the researcher, accepted responsibility for my observations, descriptions and explanations (Steier, 1991).

The outcome of this study includes the stories as told by myself and the participants. Using the research material acquired from the individual interviews, focus groups and journals, I constructed relevant themes and discuss the participants’ views under these themes. To verify the stories of the participants, I included them in the co-construction of their stories in order to make sure that their stories clearly reflect both their realities as well as mine. I wrote each of their stories as I experienced it and gave it to them to evaluate and give me feedback on the authority of the stories. They were all impressed with the stories I wrote and not one of them made any changes to the original story. This confirms that the stories written here reflect their realities combined with mine. These stories can be found in chapters 4, 5 and 6.

I also include a chapter of my own story (Chapter 7) in which I describe my experience of the whole research process and the impact that it had on me as a researcher.

The outcome of this study includes giving feedback to the school, the school psychologist and the participants. I, the researcher, will compile letters to each of the parties concerned in which I will carefully explain my findings and present my recommendations.

Conclusion

From a postmodern point of view, the participants in this study construct their realities concerning peer support through social interaction, in language, organized and maintained through the narratives or stories they tell. These narratives or social constructions are not essentially true, though, and can be interpreted in various ways. Adolescence and peer support are socially constructed discourses that are kept alive by society and on a smaller scale, by the school where this research was undertaken.

The researcher makes use of a qualitative, exploratory research approach and uses individual interviewing, focus groups and journaling to explore the experiences, thoughts and feelings of three peer supporters.

The following four chapters describe the outcome of the research process which consists of the participants' stories as told from their point of view and from the researcher's. The researcher's story is also given.

CHAPTER 4

JOSHUA'S STORY

When we strive to become better than we are,
Everything around us becomes better too.

Paulo Coelho (1992, p.158)

Joshua is a 17-year-old boy, high school student and Peer Support Group (PSG) member. What stands out most about Joshua is his compassion for and faith in others. He is a caring person who always has time to listen. His fellow PSG members respect him and look up to him.

Tracing the history

Joshua first heard about the PSG when he met and had a conversation with someone who was then on the PSG. At first he was a bit sceptical because at that stage he thought that he wouldn't want to go to talk to a PSG member, as he didn't really have a relationship with him or her. His opinion has changed since then.

I think that it is very nice because it helps the children. Sometimes it can be hard for them to go to a counsellor because they don't really know the person but I still think that it's easier to talk to someone your own age and someone who knows the school.

Joshua's friends would always come to speak to him whenever they had a problem and this led to Joshua wanting to use his abilities to be a PSG member. His friends told him that he had good listening skills and he decided that he could use these skills to help people if he became a PSG member. That was also the main reason why he wanted to be on the PSG: to help people.

Joshua found the selection process for the PSG nerve-racking. When the grade 11s went on a grade camp at the beginning of the year and the

organizers asked who wanted to join the PSG, 75% of the whole group said they wanted to join. With so many other students interested, Joshua felt anxious and started doubting if he would get a chance to be a PSG member. In the end he did get his wish.

I was surprised [to be selected as a PSG member] because so many people applied. And I was a bit scared because I'm also in grade 11 this year. There are so many things that you have to do and it's such a transition from grade 10 to grade 11. So, I didn't really know how I was going to cope with being on the PSG too.

Gone camping

Two psychologists, a teacher, a researcher and 18 PSG members went camping for a weekend. The purpose of this camp was for the PSG members to get to know themselves on a personal level and to teach them certain basic counselling skills. For Joshua the camp was a great experience.

We all wanted this to work so we put our all into it. The way everyone just forgot what group they came from at school and enjoyed themselves was incredible. The highlight for me was the meditation and the sense of clarity I felt afterwards. It was like somebody had opened a window in my stuffy brain. I learned that we are all very different with different views on almost anything but this diversity is what brings us together. This wanting to show compassion that the whole group portrays is a testament to the reason why we were chosen.

Basic counselling skills taught the PSG members that it is not necessary to give advice to someone who is being counselled. Joshua felt that this freed him in a sense as he would sometimes feel compelled to give advice or to give an answer to a problem.

On camp I did this exercise with one of my fellow PSG members: he had to counsel us on our problems and the psychologist was there trying to conduct the whole counselling thing so that everyone can see how it is done. But then he counselled me, like roleplay, and in the end even though he didn't give me advice I found an answer that worked for me. It was like a big thing because even though he didn't give me advice he helped me a lot more than he would have if he had given me advice. I came up with the answer, which gives me the power to go do the thing. It empowers me and that's like the main thing about the PSG.

Joshua still finds it difficult to not give advice when he is supporting someone. When it is something he feels very strongly about or something that he has had previous experience in, he especially wants to tell the person to handle it in that same way. It frustrates him when he feels the need to give advice but when the person manages to find the answer for him or herself, Joshua feels relieved and satisfied.

I found it very hard to not tell him what I thought he should do or asking 'leading questions'. I was proud of myself though, that I didn't break, but I lead the person to finding his own conclusion instead of giving him mine. I can see how this is a learning experience and how it can change somebody's outlook on the world. Sometimes, though, you are not sure whether the person has really found a true answer to his problem.

On becoming a PSG member

Being a PSG member has made Joshua feel that in order to help someone, he should provide a solution to the problem, something substantial that will solve the problem. He has come to the realization that support is a gradual process and he has started to get used to the idea that even if

something doesn't take effect immediately, it might take effect eventually but that he cannot control whether it takes effect or not.

Joshua attempts to control the urge to give advice or speak his mind by always keeping something to drink nearby. Whenever he finds himself wanting to say something, for example giving advice or speaking his mind, he can just take a sip of his drink instead of replying. Other times when the problem does not seem too big he asks leading questions in order to clarify the choices that person has made throughout the process. When he can help someone to realize where he or she took a wrong turn and to go back to that point and start again from there, he feels like he has really helped that person.

At the end you want to know what the person is thinking and you will be left with sort of a satisfaction that the person has gained something from it. And you gain something as well by knowing that. But with many interviews at the end you are left with sort of an unsure feeling because you don't really know what the person is thinking. You're not sure, although they tell you you've helped them, you're not really sure.

Uncertainty starts creeping in whenever Joshua wonders about whether he has helped someone or not. He knows that just by talking to someone he is already helping but it is hard for him to determine if he has helped someone completely. He handles this uncertainty by keeping in touch with the person and monitoring how the process develops. It is hard for him when he gets to a point where he realizes someone is not really going to change no matter what he does or says. He has, however, never reached a point where he gave up on someone. He always keeps on trying. It is difficult for him to find peace until he knows the person has been helped.

To try again and again normally changes a person, even if it's not completely, it does help a bit. Just to know that someone is thinking about you and wants to help you is sometimes enough to change a person.

A difficult situation for Joshua to handle is when someone has different norms, values and opinions than he does about certain things, especially if that person has chosen to do something that is wrong in Joshua's eyes. It is hard for him to then get into that person's mind and to feel what he or she is going through, as he cannot imagine what it feels like. He is aware of his judgemental side and controls it by purposefully trying to always keep an open mind and to not let his culture or personality get in the way.

The only two things that supporting someone takes from Joshua is time and self-control. He feels that supporting someone gives him more than it takes from him. Feeling content and good about himself are the two things that supporting someone gives Joshua. When a case touches him deeply, supporting someone can become draining and he catches himself becoming emotionally invested in the situation. This is something that he is still teaching himself to control.

I kept it [the case] to myself and tried to handle it because I didn't feel I could speak to someone about it very openly because I didn't really know what I was feeling myself. I was feeling ... I think I was feeling very sad. I just kept it to myself and it eventually wore off. I don't feel as strongly as I used to. I don't feel as obliged to do something.

Training is an important part of the PSG, but the PSG members' need for more training was not met. This is a necessity for Joshua.

I think I need training on how to handle those things [suicide case] if they come my way. Because some things I don't think I'll be able to handle, like the things they [other PSG members] are handling now.

Exploring changes and effects

Maturity has helped Joshua to learn to control getting emotionally involved in his cases. Being in the PSG has helped him to mature even more as it is here that he has learned self-control and how to have insight into what other people are going through. “You want to feel what they are feeling but you do not want to become them.”

Being exposed to things that he hasn't been exposed to before has also helped Joshua mature. Insight into other people's problems and lives and seeing them look to him for help has given Joshua a feeling of contentment and upliftment. “It helps you to mature more because when you're helping someone you feel as though you yourself are sort of reaching into this person, which is something you haven't experienced before in your life”.

Joshua used to be judgemental about certain people but since becoming a PSG member he has learned not to judge other people. This is a very important lesson for him as he feels that the moment you judge someone, you start looking down on him or her and you end up not really helping the person.

Joshua found it challenging to grow on an emotional level in the sense of learning self-control and containing himself.

I feel like I have grown and I have learned self-control and how to contain myself. Not to always let out what I feel inside. To just let it out at the right time rather than in front of a person. I don't know how I learned this ... It's just one of those things that you have to ... and you don't really know that you can do it until you actually do it and then it's like, “Oh, cool! I can do that!”

Joshua's courage has increased to such an extent that he now has the courage to do things that he would not have done before.

I find that I can talk to anyone! Now when I see people sitting on the benches and I know one of them then I just sit there and I talk to everyone. It just frees you! That you can do pretty much anything! I'm not afraid of them! I realize that before, even though I didn't actually know it, I was afraid of these people. I held back myself. But now that I'm a PSG member and I've experienced so many different kinds of people, I find it very easy to make friends or talk to someone, anyone for whatever reason.

Being a PSG member has had an impact on many areas of Joshua's life. The impact on his academic life is favourable, especially when it comes to subjects like Drama, English and History.

If you're doing drama and you're playing a character you can sort of tap into the feelings of that character according to the script, the words that are being said. You just imagine to yourself, "This person is saying this, therefore he would be feeling this and this". Or in history when you learn about certain people being oppressed for so long then you know exactly what these people were feeling. It helps you to sort of identify with them and analyse the situation properly with more insight than you would have normally.

Joshua's personal life has been affected in a positive way, especially his friendships and relationships.

It's like I can't walk through the halls without saying hi to anyone. I mean it's just one of those things that's made me into sort of a likable person. And I enjoy that. I enjoy knowing that I have so many friends and that if I ever need support then I can just turn to someone and

they'll help me. So, I enjoy the freedom I have because before it was like, "I don't know that person so I shouldn't really talk to him" or "I should ask for his help" or "I shouldn't try to get to know him".

Before becoming a PSG member, it took time for Joshua to get to know people and become friends with them. Now he has discovered that joining the PSG has given him the opportunity to expand his social life as he finds it easier to make friends and he is more open-minded about certain things.

You learn to listen to other people and what they are saying. You learn to read certain gestures or certain facial expressions and then you know this person is feeling this way. You learn to listen to them better and then once you start listening to the person he starts talking more 'cause most people just have that thing that they want to say but they never have someone to say it to. So, you become that someone, which helps your relationship with that person or with those people. And it helps them because they want to come to you a bit more and speak to you a bit more.

Having many friends has been exciting but tiring for Joshua. Friends demand time and attention and it can become an exhausting and frustrating situation. "This whole PSG business is getting quite hard ... its tiring ... my long term friendships seem to be suffering, we are drifting apart ... I don't have that much energy".

When the demands became too much, Joshua made a conscious decision to balance and prioritize his life and his friends in a more constructive way.

Joshua has also experienced the disadvantages of being a PSG member.

It's just that sometimes people have really big problems and you don't really understand that until you're in the PSG and you're trying to comfort someone whose only parent has died. It's really hard to do because then you realize that this could happen to me. That whole feeling of ... you're not invincible. Then it really hits you once in a while. That even though you might think that you have everything figured out life tends to throw you a curve ball.

Sometimes Joshua wants to do the work for the person he is supporting. But he has learned that he is not the one who needs to take responsibility for the other person.

And you can't hope for someone, you can help them, you can do your best but you can't hope for them. Hope is like the one very important thing and you can't do that for someone. And without that, you are sort of compelled to give up. Not give up, but you feel like you want to.

Taking on the PSG member role has become second nature for Joshua. The downside of this is that sometimes the PSG member in Joshua comes out while having a conversation with a friend, when he actually wanted to approach the person as a friend and not as a PSG member. It is difficult for him to draw boundaries and know when to be a PSG member and when to be a friend.

When you get to a very personal level with someone that you know very well and you do want to feel what they are going through then you find it very hard to actually feel what they are going through or to stop analysing and listen to the words themselves as they come out.

Reflections on being a PSG member

Difficult and easy problems inevitably find their way into Joshua's experiences. Throughout his duty year, Joshua experienced frustration,

confusion, exhaustion, uncertainty but also confidence and contentment through his successes.

Depression that has taken a hold on someone's life qualifies as a difficult problem for Joshua. In such a case he would first attempt to help the person in his own way and if he does not succeed he would refer the person for professional help. An easier problem for Joshua to handle would be if someone is feeling stressed or is coming out of a close relationship. This is easier as he would be able to identify with such a person and be able to speak from previous experience. The urge to give advice would be greater in the latter case, though, and Joshua usually reverts to sharing with the person what has worked for him personally, without implying that the person should do the same thing. His aim is to empower people to find the answers for themselves.

As a group the PSG members had to present a talk on eating disorders. For this project, each of the members had to do his or her own research on this topic. Joshua decided to surf the net and found a website on eating disorders. This affected him to a great extent.

And the stuff they talked about ... to me it was so out there ... it was not really something that happens to people ... I mean the stuff they mentioned and the way they talked about it They would have a testimonial and then have people respond to it and some of the people were people with eating disorders and they would say, "This has touched me so much," "It has helped me a lot," "I identify with this", "I didn't really get it because it didn't really appeal to me". And that's why I think that only people with eating disorders know about eating disorders. They understand what goes on in the mind and in the body and everything.

Listening actively, frequent eye-contact, creating a safe, comfortable space, open-mindedness and being non-judgemental are very important

qualities for Joshua as a PSG member. When he is supporting someone he tries to always make use of these skills.

People are very good at telling facial expressions or just other small things, gestures here and there that you feel negativity towards them. So, if your brain is open toward whatever they're saying and you don't really care whatever background they come from, whatever kind of person they are or whatever other people say about them, you just care about whatever is coming out of their mouths, it helps them to feel more comfortable and to gain more trust from them.

Joshua finds it hard to be the friendly PSG member when people do not reciprocate the friendliness. He has to have self-control in situations like these and maintain friendliness from his side.

I try my best never to get to that point where I become what I see in them. Because sometimes you know someone is not friendly towards you, you know someone despises you or hates you and you want to show them that you can hate them back. But then you know that you are in the PSG and that sort of helps because in life you can't always sink to that level with everyone who is not friendly towards you. So, it helps you to gain self-control.

Being a PSG member means having many friends. At first Joshua liked the idea of making new friends every day, but soon he realized that to maintain these friendships took up too much of his time.

I had my usual group of friends and then I had the other people to whom I speak and say hi and then talk a bit and I go on to the next person. To keep up these friendships, you have to talk to all these people and it was getting a bit too much. I had all these people that I had to see to and then my friends were sort of left in the dark. We

were sort of growing apart because I would never get to see my friends, I would always be talking to these other people. They were good people and I did want to be friends with them, it's just that by being friends with them I was busy losing my friendships with the other people.

Pressure played a part in Joshua's experiences and is one of the things that he didn't expect to be so immense at first. However, as Joshua became used to playing the role of a PSG member, the pressure became less difficult to handle.

They sort of see you as a trusted person if you're a PSG member. You know, someone who can speak to you that other people actually believe in you. So, as a PSG member you are looked up to by so many people and I didn't really think of it that way because I just thought the PSG are like normal people like everyone else. But it's not really like that. It comes with a big responsibility and I didn't realize how big this responsibility was until I was in the PSG and feeling the pressure. Now I understand.

The dynamics within the PSG did not remain the same throughout the year. Sharing something of themselves created a bond between the PSG members, which seemed to crumble over time. For Joshua, the closeness they used to have is not there now, nearing the end of the year. He expected the PSG to be more active as a group than they were in the end. This saddens him as he feels that everyone, including himself, should have made a bigger effort to be more in touch with each other.

Claiming roles

At first Joshua perceived the role of a PSG member as "only supporting someone". He had certain expectations about what it was that a PSG

member did. His perception of this matter has changed since becoming a PSG member himself and realizing that, in fact, the role of a PSG member turned out to be so much more than he originally thought.

I thought PSG would just be ... you would be asked to help people and you'd help them. You'd be asked to speak to them and you'd share information with them. And that would be the end of it. But it's not! It's just so much more! That's like just the tip of the iceberg. I mean sometimes you do have to speak to these people but most of the time it's just being there for them. Because that's very important for people. Like if you are there for them then they start to trust you even more, they start to share with you more. Listening is one of the most important things. If you listen to them and you perceive what's underneath those words, if you listen very carefully to every word, how it's said, after some time you start getting the hang of it. You start listening to the words that are not said. Most of the time there is so much that is not said, it's actually there and you don't really get it. When you listen deeper, you actually get it.

A responsible person. I mean that's my role: to be a role model for other people and to be a pillar of support in the school. I think that's my role. To be one of those people that stands out, one of those people that even though they stand out, they are still part of the school. They still go through the same things and still feel the same things, it's just that above those feelings and those experiences they still stand out. They sort of have the spirit of the school in them. I think that's my role.

I think it's the way the other, especially the younger people, look at you. The way you lead your life, the way you that you interact with other people, the things that you get into in school. It's more of a role model thing. Most of us, like the grade 11s and grade 12s, don't realize how much those younger people look up to us. When you're a PSG

member you realize that these people actually do respect you very much. And it's up to you to show them what to do when they get to this stage.

For Joshua supporting someone as a PSG member and supporting someone as a friend are not very different. The only difference is that with a friend it is more personal than with a stranger.

For me the PSG Joshua and the friend Joshua is pretty much the same person because I try to almost never give advice to someone and to more like listen to him and let him find his own answers. Because sometimes you don't know all the things that are going through a person's head and you don't really feel what the person is feeling, so you might end up making a mistake and then that person has to pay for the mistake you made. So, I often try not to give advice. Not at all. Even as the friend or the PSG me. I sort of integrated the PSG me into the friend me.

Personal sources of guidance and support

Joshua relies on his faith and on his friends for guidance. Just being with them makes all the difference.

My main source of guidance would be God. He's number one! Whenever I'm down or when I feel bad then I just turn to God. I don't know. It's just like this magical thing! I always feel better. I would also say that my friends are very supportive. Whenever I'm feeling down I can always go to my friends ... just being around happy people makes you happy!

Usefulness of peer support groups in schools

For Joshua, PSGs are significant as children seldom want to talk to an educator or someone in an authority position. Talking to one of your peers is comfortable, relaxed and uncomplicated.

I think it's important because sometimes when someone just needs to talk to someone, even though it's not very important, even though you don't need to go to a psychologist to talk to them about something, then you can talk to the PSG and tell us something, just to get it off your chest.

So many teenagers go through things that they don't understand or through feelings they can't explain and they don't know whom to turn to. It's very common that teenagers the one day feel stressed and the next day they are feeling ecstatic, you know, up and down, up and down. (It is easier for kids to talk to other kids their own age than to a teacher) because you can't really relate to the teachers that well because they are a lot older than us and they have their own lives and their lives are very different from ours. But someone who's your friend and who you have known for a long time and is in the PSG, then it's easier to relate to him. I think a PSG is like a constant: if you're feeling bad or you're feeling good or whatever you can just go to these people and let it out, you know.

Constructing research

Joshua decided to join the research process as part of his goal for his grade 11 year was to do everything that he could do. When the organizers asked for volunteers for the PSG, Joshua put up his hand. Joshua does not regret making this decision.

The thing is I didn't really know what I was getting myself into when I said yes I was going to do it! I was in grade 11 and I had decided that I was going to do everything that I can do. So I just put up my hand when they asked for volunteers! But now I'm really thankful that I did! Because now I've started to reflect on being in the PSG. I wouldn't have normally reflected if I wasn't in this research group. Now I've started to realize that from every single encounter I have with other people I can gain something from that. There is always something there.

[The reflecting has helped] to actually see what is staring me in the eye. Sometimes I speak to people and I think, "I don't know if I really helped that person because he hasn't really found an answer". At first it was like if you speak to someone you have to give them an answer, that's what I thought. Then I realized that you don't always have to give them an answer. Sometimes it's up to them. If you reflect on it, write it down and read what you have written then you realize that you don't necessarily need to give this person an answer. They can find their own answer. And if they do find their own answer it's going to be so much better than me just telling them what to do. And them not even doing what I suggested. I think it really helps me to realize what the PSG is all about. I mean if I wasn't having this conversation with you then I wouldn't really think about these things. Not in depth like this.

Writing down his experiences assisted Joshua in digesting everything that was happening around him. At first he wasn't too keen on the idea of journaling but now he finds that he cannot stop once he starts writing.

The journaling has helped. You might think something in your head but when you write it down there's a whole new dimension. When you read what you've written later then you realize something. Like sometimes I write something down because I'm angry and then when I

look back at it I think, “Oh, my goodness! What the hell was I angry about? It’s not that bad!” It actually helps you to reflect. That’s the most important part of journaling. It helps me very much in reflection. And in expressing myself also.

It could have also been helpful for Joshua if he had been able to digest his experiences by talking to other PSG members.

I think I would like to speak to the other PSG members. The thing is I didn’t go to those meetings I was telling you about because I couldn’t make it. So I didn’t really get to speak to them about these things but I would like to speak to them about it because they’re quite relevant. Like if you do get to speak to them you see what other people are going through and you get to see that you are not the only one who’s going through it. So, I think going to speak to them would be another way of expressing what I’m feeling.

Joshua experienced the research process as being relaxed and personal and different from what he expected, which was surveys and questionnaires.

I think I can be more candid with you. I can tell you more ... more of what it’s like and what’s going on. I don’t have to guess what you want to hear and tell you that. I can just talk! And it helps because normally I don’t talk for a whole hour! It’s like I think and speak at the same time, I don’t think about what I’m saying before I say it. It just flows. With that you can say more and be more candid because you don’t have time to evaluate the words ... and they are like raw words, they weren’t like thought up. It’s not like a speech that I wrote down. It’s very natural.

You don’t really get to tell anyone that much about being a PSG member and what it’s like. But when you come here you get to reflect

and see what's really going on. It's not the same when stuff is in your head and when you say it. When you say it, you actually hear it at the same time and it sounds differently.

Honestly, I feel a bit sad for the other PSG members because they don't really get to talk to other people about it. I don't know how it would feel not to be able to express what you are going through because it's a lot. And maybe you don't really understand how much it is until you start talking about it and seeing how much it is affecting you.

Looking back

I'll remember the PSG camp. It was like one of the best. I'll remember the PSG members themselves, how everyone was so different and everyone was their own person. And everything about us as a group. I'll remember how the learning helped me to become an open kind of person. And how to ask open questions, how not to judge, how to speak to someone even though you barely even know them.

I don't think I would want to go through the whole thing again from the beginning. But I would recommend it to everyone. I would like to go to the next step.

Joshua's wisdom

Everybody has a bucket. This is your bucket of happiness and general contentment. Only somebody else can add or take away from your bucket. To add to someone else's is to add to your own. To take away from somebody else's is to take away from your own. I want mine to overflow and will therefore fill everybody else's up.

People forget your words, people forget your deeds but they never forget how you made them feel.

CHAPTER 5

IRENE'S STORY

No matter what he does,
every person on earth plays a central
role in the history of the world.
And normally he doesn't know it.

Paulo Coelho (1992, p. 167)

Irene is a 17-year-old high school student who experiences herself as being a good PSG member. She enjoys feeling wanted and needed and being able to help people. For this reason she became a PSG member. She enjoys philosophising about the meaning of life and the purpose of her life.

Tracing the history

Irene first heard about the Peer Support Group (PSG) when her older sister joined the PSG. Only when someone in the school committed suicide and the PSG started counselling and supporting students, did Irene realize what it was all about.

It's just giving up your own time to listen to other people and like actually caring, you know, 'cause it's inevitable that everybody's so wrapped up in their own lives that they become selfish. But not in a bad way; it's just the way that things are. And I think as a peer supporter you kind of have a responsibility to always remember, "Hey, it's not just about me." And in that way you learn so many different things about people.

Her intuition told Irene that being a PSG member is something that she would be good at. Hearing her name called out when she was selected as a PSG member made her blissfully happy. "I was so happy! Euphoria. Really, it was amazing!"

Irene believes that the PSG talk to students who are experiencing problems. She feels that people do not always appreciate and recognize everything that the PSG does and this saddens her as she knows how hard a peer support member works.

I see people that ... think the PSG is only a status thing 'cause a lot of people think like that. But now I know that we actually do a lot more than people think; we do a lot of good stuff, you know.

Gone camping

The PSG camp was a great experience for Irene.

The camp was actually quite mind blowing and very tiring. And it was so much fun! I just bonded with those people and got to love them so much but now it's breaking down ... it's so sad. The training was good and I learned a lot about myself and other people as well.

Irene feels like the PSG members formed a close bond when they went camping but that this bond did not last throughout the whole year, and this realization disappoints her.

We used to have like this bond and when I look back at the camp there are so many memories but now I don't know at school things are not the same anymore. I was so scared that that was going to happen and it did. We kind of drifted apart. And that is really sad for me because I know the point of the PSG is not really to make the PSG best friends but that's just what happened. But now we're growing apart.

At the moment there isn't much interaction within the group. We're all kind of drifting apart. It used to be really cool, like when we got back from camp. We would freak out when we saw each other at school! Now it's like we've calmed down and we don't freak out anymore. We used to know each other very intensely and now it's different.

Learning new skills whilst camping was a meaningful experience for Irene. Many of the other PSG members found it difficult to not give advice to someone who comes to speak to them, but for Irene not giving advice is not a difficult thing.

I think the training was really important and everything but some people approach me as a friend and not as a PSG member. And then it's important for me to remember that it's not because I'm on the PSG it's because I'm Irene. I do give advice to my friends in a way that I would naturally handle it, you know. But then again I'm not really one to give advice so I don't really give advice anyway.

On becoming a PSG member

Irene believes people choose to come to speak to her specifically because they see something of themselves in her.

I think you kind of go to someone you think you can relate to. And the people who came to me ... I saw a piece of myself in them.

I'm really peaceful and I think people can see that and they have told me that a lot. And I'm really gentle with people's feelings and I think it's very evident to others. I don't judge and I think people know this as well.

Irene's own life experiences have assisted her in helping others.

If you've had experience in something you'd know about it and you'd be able to give advice because if you've made a mistake or if you've made a right choice or something. But I don't think one person is more experienced than the next, I just think people have different kinds of experiences. And even when not experiencing anything, you know, experiencing emotions and stuff, you're still experiencing maybe like boredom or loneliness or anything, you know?

I find like in life everyone gets a share of ... problems and stuff. But I think it's adapted so you can handle it. I don't think God gives you more than you can handle. I think the whole PSG experience has been like a mutual share of each other so you can cope with your own problems.

Training is an important part of the PSG, but the PSG members' need for more training was not met. Training is essential for Irene.

I think after handling this suicide case I can handle almost anything! I think, yes, I do need more training to handle it in a better way next time.

[Another suicide case might have prepared me to handle this one better] but that's the only thing because even if we were like trained in suicide cases it's not the same thing that you get into. I think we would not put so much of ourselves into it. I don't know, it's kind of made us ... numb. And that's why if we had another suicide case it would go a lot easier.

Exploring changes and effects

Being a PSG member has changed Irene in some ways. It has helped her to crawl out of her own hiding place and be confronted with other people's problems.

I think I have become more compassionate. When I would talk to people ... I used to be quite excluded and introverted. Now it's kind of changing. I didn't want to change back then cause I thought that I don't need people, but it's not really about what you need, it's about ... it's just the way things work, you know.

And I've realized that I'm not alone and nobody really is alone anyway. You can't help but think you are alone because ... I don't know ... it

boils down to that whole self-pity thing ... all of that but you can't really help feeling alone but you aren't 'cause there are some people with the same problems. It's so weird because I have come across people that I'd never expected to have these problems and then all of a sudden I would realize that that person has the same kind of problem.

Supporting someone takes time and to a certain extent it also takes pride from Irene. On the other hand, it gives her satisfaction in knowing that she helped someone, insight into other people's backgrounds and a sense of tolerance. Being a PSG member has also taught Irene to be non-judgemental.

I think I've opened up more because I don't feel as alone anymore. I've lost the ... I don't know. I used to like be in my group of friends and judge other groups and now I don't see any differences in people anymore. We're all so alike and if everyone can see that it would be so much easier.

At times Irene still catches herself judging someone but she accepts this as being inevitable and part of the human condition, as long as she is aware of it and does not let it get in the way of supporting someone.

Irene has experienced how other people's attitudes towards her have changed and finds this hurtful. Currently many negative feelings surround the PSG in the school. Irene tries to make sense of this.

I understand where they're coming from because the PSG is somewhere everyone wants to be. Obviously you are going to be jealous and resentful. But at the same time I don't understand it because they voted for us, you know. It's weird: the PSG is somewhere everyone wants to be and if they're not selected then suddenly it's somewhere they don't want to be.

Reflections on being a PSG member

Irene has learned numerous things about herself and about other people. People surprise her in a number ways and she surprises herself sometimes.

People handle things differently. And they have different perceptions of things that I didn't really think would have any effect on anything. And I've also learned that people are not always the way they seem, you know. Everybody has got some kind of story behind him or her. It's quite interesting as well.

Sometimes it is frustrating being a PSG member and Irene realized this when she was confronted with a difficult case.

A while ago I was disappointed in myself because I've always been really good with the whole PSG thing and then all of a sudden this girl told me stuff and I just didn't know how to react. I was speechless and I couldn't get a word out. I really didn't know what to say! I was just like, "I don't know!" There was nothing I could have said to her and that disappointed me because normally with other people I have a certain set of things that I have to say to them, you know. I have words normally. Some kind of inspiration and I know it's not my job to inspire, just to listen. It was kind of like a shock, like a disappointment. Afterwards I was like, "Oh, Irene! Arrrggghh!"

Being able to do her job as a PSG member is something that makes Irene feel good about herself. However, she does not always experience being a PSG member as a good thing.

It's not really all flowery and everything. There are some really not so nice things about it. I know it sounds cliché and everything but your own time really goes to bits, you know? As well as other people label you and it's quite tiring emotionally as well. So, ja, it does make me

feel good about myself the fact that I can help people and stuff but it's tiring. [When it gets tiring] I get home and I sleep and I wake up and I go on with my life and then I sleep again! You can only make other people's problems so much your own. You can't handle their problems for them. There's only so much you can do. And so, to just keep that in mind and do what I can and if my ability restricts anything else it's just going to have to be fine.

Irene was confronted with a difficult case when one of the students at her school threatened to commit suicide. This had an immense impact on Irene. "That was the most difficult thing and that was what I was most scared of [before becoming a PSG member]. That was such a difficult situation I didn't know what to say or do! ... Maybe I've just become too attached".

Irene eventually found a way to deal with this case. In the end she decided to change her strategy and to approach this person as a friend and not as a PSG member. For Irene, this was the answer as the responsibility on her then became less but it was still exhausting.

[At first] I was angry! But I just got myself to adapt because I couldn't bring myself to tell [the person] that I'm not even going to try to help. I just kind of learned to live with it. But I must say, I didn't handle her in a complete PSG sense. And then I kind of handled it more as a friend. And it kind of made the role of the PSG clearer when [the person] thanked me and everything.

In a sense, this approach that Irene followed resembles "befriending" (described in chapter 2). She followed a more informal approach to peer support and became a friend for this person.

Another thing that is hard for Irene to cope with is when religion comes into the picture.

That's also what I'm scared of. If one day I would be a psychologist or psychiatrist and you can't let your religion play any kind of role and that's kind of scary. It affected the advice I was to give or more support I was to give. If someone told me, "I'm having sex with my boyfriend every weekend," immediately there would be a bell in my mind saying, "Okay, that's not good." But as a peer supporter you can't really say, "Stop doing it". Your advice comes from a very different place. You can't really lift your own opinions. I'm quite scared of forcing my religion on someone. I think it would completely push people away if you start saying that religiously that person is wrong. Or religiously do A, B and C. And I think that they would then withdraw their trust and themselves.

Irene finds it difficult to always keep smiling, no matter what she is going through herself at the time. Sometimes it can be hard to separate other people's problems from her own. "It's like you have your own problems and then you have other people's problems and it topples over each other and onto each other".

I think if I counsel someone who's a lot like me but I look up to or that I respect then I think their problems might have a big influence on my life. But right now ... of course my friends I hold them in a high position and yes, that has had an influence on my life. People I don't know don't really have an effect on me.

According to Irene there is no such thing as an easy case to handle.

I don't think there really is anything that's easy to handle. At first I thought something like, "I broke up with my boyfriend," would be an easy one but it's not because you deal with real emotions that is different for every person.

She claims that she knows that she has helped someone when that person comes back to talk to her again or when she sees changes in that

person's behaviour. She does, however, realize that these changes can also be because of other influences and not necessarily because of what she has done as a PSG member. Irene feels that she is not helping someone when she does not know what to say or what to do with that person.

Being a PSG member can be a difficult thing for Irene as on the one hand she has to take on responsibility and on the other hand people like her supervisor tells her to not take on so much responsibility. "You are appointed this task but then it's so narrowed down to things you should say and you shouldn't say that it becomes like ... a task, something you do".

Irene's job as a PSG member does not end when the school bell rings at the end of the school day.

Often at parties kids in my grade I don't even know would kind of come up to me and we would go sit aside and talk all night. Most of my experiences were actually out of school or at least when I am in the vicinity of people, like during break.

Claiming roles

For Irene there is a difference between being a PSG member and being a friend.

I think there is like a big difference because to be a PSG member is to like ask open questions and not give advice, you know, like this whole structured thing. But as a friend it all comes really naturally and you're sincere when you're telling people what you're telling them as a friend. There are a lot less formalities and stuff.

However, sometimes Irene finds herself confusing the two roles. When something is difficult to handle she resorts to using her skills as a PSG member, regardless if the person she is supporting is a friend or a stranger.

I think you make the same vow as a PSG member and as a friend and that is to help people who need your help. As you help someone, whether it's a friend or not, you learn things about that person that ties you two together. I think to have boundaries helps to a certain extent but it should not take over your life. [When you want to be friends with the person you are supporting] the boundaries and structures fall away. You have to assess the risk and then decide for yourself.

For Irene, the role she takes on depends on the case.

When it comes to difficult cases ... it's hard to be a friend and there is like a difference between the two. But when it's like with our grade 8 classes, someone you're acquainted with, there's not really a difference between the two.

I think being a friend is actually a lot more sufficient or more effective than being a peer supporter. Because if you talk to people there is a lot more sincerity if you're a friend. But I do think that the PSG helps to identify a person who you can come and talk to. But, I don't know, I think it's better to handle them like friends when they come to you. [When you are a PSG member] there is like more formality [and] it's very mechanical.

Personal sources of guidance and support

Talking to fellow PSG members about cases is a form of digesting everything that is happening around her and something that Irene finds very useful as she feels better after blowing off steam.

Irene also relies on her faith to help her through tough times.

To a large extent it [guidance and support] comes from God. I do this for Him. And I know that He helps me and that he always tells me what to do. Other than God I think the other PSG members because they

also go through similar stuff. Also I think my guidance comes from a natural affinity for helping people.

Irene feels she needs more guidance and support from the PSG's supervisor.

Our supervisor is not giving us all that much support. She has a lot of other stuff on her plate. Because she started this whole thing and because she is the school counsellor she should be more involved. But I don't blame her.

Usefulness of peer support groups in schools

Irene asserts that having a PSG in a school is a useful concept. When she was in grade 8 she would not have spoken to a PSG member as it was a relatively alien concept back then. However, Irene says this perception has changed over the past few years among students and they feel more inclined to make use of the PSG. For Irene being a PSG member is similar to being a friend and for this reason it makes it easier for students to come and talk to the PSG members.

Constructing research

Irene feels that she did not have any expectations when she volunteered to join this research project.

I think I was just so eager on the whole PSG thing that I wanted everything of it. I wanted to be involved. But I don't think that I really had any expectations. If I were to imagine it from expecting research to be conducted, I would imagine it quite like this.

Being part of the research process has been a positive experience for Irene.

It has actually made me think about stuff that I don't think I would have actually discussed with myself. What is the impact of A, B and C on my life? And I think it's been helping me to digest everything and answering my own questions.

Irene is clear on her role as a participant of the research process and at the same time she perceives her role as a PSG member as part of her. Therefore it would be inevitable to touch on more than the formal part of PSG only.

[My role is] to give an accurate description of what the job of the PSG is and to give you some clarity on issues that concerns the PSG. But I must say that when I talk I talk more personally, like I kind of think about it for myself and I answer not in terms of your research but I don't think that's my role, I think my role is to answer in terms of your research. [But] if I were to tell you in terms of your research then I would tell you things that ... When I talk I touch on other things as well, not just PSG stuff and I think it would be a lot more formal otherwise. You would ask a question and I would give you a proper answer concerning the question. But I think it's a lot more sincere when I just talk.

Being a research participant served the purpose of contemplative, reflective learning for Irene.

It [the journaling] helped me with my writing and when you put stuff on paper it makes it a lot more definite, which is a good thing and a bad thing because it's not always good to make stuff definite. And on the other hand it also helps to digest. You can actually read back and see how your feelings have changed about it. I think it was a good thing. Not only from this experience but also in general. I knew at the beginning that it was not going to be nice, but you kind of get into the whole thing and it becomes like an addiction.

The only thing the research process lacked, according to Irene, was more meetings with the researcher to be able to digest everything that she experiences.

Looking back

Irene feels that she is better off having had the experience of being a PSG member and that, given the chance to choose all over again, she would volunteer to be a PSG member for a second time.

I can't imagine where I'd be if I'd never been on the PSG camp and made those connections.

I will always remind myself that there are people worse off than me. It shouldn't be an evil comfort but it's just ... whatever. Things I'll remember is the difficulty of sitting with someone and discussing their problem or just listening. The listening wasn't all that hard, I'm good at listening.

And everyone has this deeper side that you can't always see.

Irene's wisdom

I think that through your life there are experiences that enable you to deal with a problem.

If you deal with the source, you'll deal with the problem.

I've been realizing more how people here tend to fuss a lot. And emotionally they experience things that they needn't experience. And that's why it is sometimes very exhausting for me because sometimes you need a break and do some light-hearted things.

Everybody has got some kind of story behind him or her.

CHAPTER 6

ANJA'S STORY

Life engenders life. Energy creates energy. It is by spending oneself that one becomes rich.

Sarah Bernhardt (n.d., n.p.)

Anja is a 17-year-old student who is in touch with her feelings and not afraid to verbalize them. She enjoys being a Peer Support Group member and feels that it is something that she is good at. Her passion is helping other people.

Tracing the history

Anja first heard about Peer Support Groups (PSG) when she joined the school. She thought it would be something that she would be good at and would enjoy doing.

I just think it's because I've been through a load of crap in my life, like a big, big load and it's not like everyday stuff you know, like my-boyfriend-broke-up-with-me-stuff. It's big teenage issues like, you know, a lot of things have happened to me. I thought maybe because I have that experience it would be good for me to speak to people who are going through the same type of thing. Because it doesn't help if you have someone who can listen to people but they don't know, you know, what the other people are going through.

Anja was surprised when she was selected as a PSG member as she did not consider herself to be a 'popular' student.

When you're our age, if you're not like self-sufficient, who are you going to vote for? You are going to vote for your best friends. You are not going to vote for the people who deserve it the most or who would

be best for the job, you're going to vote for your friends. And that actually made me realize how many friends I have, you know?

Gone camping

For Anja the PSG camp was a learning experience. She did, and still does, struggle with giving advice. "It's very hard not to give advice. Sometimes you would say something that vaguely resembles advice but they won't take it as such and say, 'But she told me to do this ...'"

Not being able to give advice frustrates Anja but she tries to keep the advice to herself.

Especially if you've been through it yourself and you know what helps! And you want to give this person advice and you want to say, "Listen, I think you should ..." and then you can't. So, [I] just sit there in silence and try to formulate some or other open question that you're going to ask this person. That's hard.

On becoming a PSG member

Anja expected her duties as a PSG member to be easier and to be confronted with more common, less stressful problems.

I thought it was going to be easier, honestly. I really didn't know that I was going to work with people who say, "I want to shoot myself today." And more common problems. Not that suicide is not a common problem, it's just hectic!

Anja feels that people see they can trust her and this is the reason they choose to speak to her. She also has other qualities that make her approachable.

I think I'm a very friendly person and I'm very loud. So first of all, because I'm loud people notice me, you know. I don't sit in a little corner and talk to people. I mean obviously you need everything in a group like the PSG, you need people from every corner. Then you get like the other people who like sit and they are quiet, you know. Then you get people who are sort of like freaky and arty and whatever. You need that. In a group like the PSG you need that. I think also ... I can relate to what they are going through.

Aspects of herself that she needs to work on include her temper.

I've got a temper you will not believe! It takes a long time for me to get angry but when I'm angry don't even come talk to me! Don't, really. My friends, they can just see when I come to school angry they must not talk to me for like an hour and then I'll be fine, you know. That's something that I need to control.

This is a difficult aspect of herself to control but she tries.

I sort of sit there ... this is going to sound really crazy ... but I sit there and I imagine myself smoking a cigarette. Like when I'm at school I will think of myself smoking a cigarette because it sort of makes me feel better. It does, really. And I do like the whole breathing thing, you know. And then when school gets out I just smoke. That's what I do.

Anja has a need for more training on how to handle difficult cases.

I do [need more training]. And I think we all need to learn how to stress down. I can feel myself getting more tired every day. I feel like we've had so much stress and stuff and our workload from school is tremendous, huge! Everything just adds up and you've got so much on your plate and it just gets too much. I think we all need to relax a bit.

Exploring changes and effects

Being a PSG member has had an impact on Anja's personal life. Anja's skills as a PSG member have spilled over into her personal life and she uses them wherever, only it is less difficult.

I find that my friends are much more open towards me. Since I've had that training where they taught us how to ask open questions and whatever, I can't apply it with someone that I don't know. But when it comes to my friends, it just comes naturally. It's extremely weird that I struggle with it when I'm with strangers. It's a learning process. Maybe it's because I know their past, you know, like I know what's been happening with them. You have a better idea of what questions to ask and what not.

Both Anja's academic life and her social life have expanded in a sense.

I'm actually doing better than before! I'm so proud of myself. It's the best I've ever done since primary school. Primary school doesn't really count you know. It's the best I've done in high school, ever. So I am ecstatic!

I think my social life is like growing! Because I just want to get out now, you know! So, I don't know. I'm having like a good time everywhere. It's just sometimes it just gets a bit too much and then you must get over it and then when you're over it you're fine again. It's actually quite cool. I never thought it would work that way.

Anja asserts that being a PSG member costs her intense emotional distress while it gives her satisfaction knowing that she helped someone.

It's like you get home and you pop a bottle of champagne type of thing. It's just like, you know, you feel, "Wow!" There's a quote, I live my life by this quote, and it says, "To know that even one life has breathed

easier because of you, that is to truly have succeeded". I like to live my life by that because every time I help someone ... I don't add them up and say, "Oh, I've succeeded so many times," you know, every time I help someone I just think, "Wow! I helped someone". And that makes me feel good. It makes me feel like a better person. But it's hard, it's really hard to get home and wondering what and how that person is doing and being afraid that they would hurt themselves, you know?

Being able to separate her personal life from her PSG work is something that Anja manages to do.

I actually don't know how I do it, but I do. I really don't know how. I think I just came to a point where I was just like, "You can't let this take over your own life. You have your own life as well." That's one thing you have to do. If I take everyone's problems onto my own shoulders who do you think is going to be the suicidal one at the end of the day? You have to. If you don't do it, you're screwed. Really.

Being a PSG member has its disadvantages also.

One of my friends told me, "Stop analysing! Rather listen. Don't go into the deeper meaning of things." On a large scale it [being a PSG member] has only advantages but then I started analysing instead of listening and that's not good.

Dealing with other people's problems makes her numb, which is a bad thing for Anja.

We've become numb to other people's problems. We still care, don't get me wrong, but it doesn't affect us as much as it used to. I think that's bad. I think that's very bad. Because then you get to your real friends and something bad happens to them and you get this PSG face again. You're so numb. And it looks then like you don't care. That's really bad.

Anja claims that she has grown on an emotional level since becoming a PSG member. “Before I was very fragile. And now I’m stronger, like, ‘We’re going to get through this, guys, come on!’ Even if I just speak to myself, you know. I have big conversations with myself.”

Reflections on being a PSG member

The first three months as a PSG member are a blur to Anja as she got involved with a student who was threatening to commit suicide. The student did not want to take action to get back on track with life and this frustrated Anja.

He/she frightens me ...

It’s like you know this [person] is manipulating and lying as far as [he/she] goes. Yes, [he/she] might be sad inside, you know, but if you’re that sad do something about it! I did something about it. Many of my friends did something about it. Don’t just sit there and feel sorry for yourself. Get up and say, “Look, I’m stronger than this, I’m going to make a change, I’m going to be a happy person.” You can’t expect everyone else to do that for you, you know, because they can’t.

[He/she] frustrates me. I’m really not far from taking [his/her] head and smashing it into a wall. I know it sounds very insensitive but you really get to that point where you’re just like, “Listen, do something about yourself. Shape up”. Really. I can help someone up to a point and then they have to take it from there. I can’t pull them through a whole four-year depression stage. I can’t do that.

I really understand what [he/she] is going through but the part that I can’t understand is: Why not try and do something about it? Why are you sitting back thinking, “Oh, no, someone else will pull me through this.” You can’t do that. I know lots of people and I’ve spoken to lots of people who have gone through the same thing. And eventually you get

to a point where you have to take it on yourself; you can't just sit back and expect someone else to.

Anja dealt with this suicide case by sleeping, shifting her focus to her social life or talking to her mother about it.

I sleep. You know when you get emotionally ... emotionally drained. You just sleep. And that's what I do, I just sleep. The thing also for me is: this is an important year for me. If I don't do well this year I can't go study right after matric. So it's like you have to separate yourself and you have to cope with it. You just have to. I don't even know how I am coping with it but I am and that's all that matters.

I count down the days till the weekend or I think about what my friends and I are going to do over the weekend, or whatever, you know. My mom ... she is the most amazing person ever. I don't even have to tell her if anything is wrong. I'm a very good actress (if I do say so myself) and I can make people think I'm very happy meanwhile I'm like breaking inside you know. But my mom is the only single person who knows when that is happening.

In the end, it took a long time for Anja to recuperate from this case.

A week! Sounds bad but I was in bed by 9 and I woke up like the latest I could over the weekends and for 2 weekends I didn't go out. I mean, who does that?! I'm like Miss Socialite!

Staying objective is tricky for Anja, especially when people want her help but they expect her to do all the work. "I get frustrated. It really is hard, you know. People just come to you and say these things that are so irrelevant to anything. But when you have to keep looking at everything objectively it gets hard."

Supporting people when she is going through a tough time herself is also difficult for Anja. “When you’ve had a rough day. And you’re really having one of those days where you don’t want to talk, you just want to sit, get this day over and done with and go sleep.”

Anja feels that when this happens there is nothing she can do, she has to force herself to sit and listen.

You’re supposed to listen to their problems, that’s your job. You can’t tell other people, “I’m sorry I’m having a bad day, I can’t listen to your problems now.” So you just sit there and think to yourself, “Okay, just listen. That’s all you have to do. You don’t have to give advice. Just listen.” Normally I would also tell them to come and speak to me the next day.

According to Anja, there is no such thing as an “easy” case to handle.

I don’t think you get easy and difficult problems. I think you get like common problems and not so common problems. I don’t think anything is really easy. I think the way you handle it makes it easier. Like, if someone were to come to you and say, “My boyfriend just broke up with me,” it sounds like an easy thing to handle because it happens to everyone and you’ve got to get through it, you know. But some people don’t handle it well. You don’t know anything about that person, you don’t know how long they were together, you don’t know what has happened in the relationship, you don’t know anything. It might be something like, “My boyfriend and I just broke up and I’m pregnant” or “My boyfriend and I broke up after three years, what should I do? This guy is my life ... blah, blah, blah.”

Anja realizes she has helped someone when she notices that the person is smiling more and instead of coming to cry on her shoulder, people come to ask her how she (Anja) is doing. She also believes that she can see it and sense it, especially when looking at the person’s body language and the

way he or she walks. The person also comes to speak to her less often and/or comes to thank her for helping.

Anja tasted success when she managed to support an adult from outside of school with a problem.

It was really weird! It's was nice for me because people actually want to talk to people that aren't going to analyse every second. It was cool for me and it really worked out in the end. But I was so like, "Whoa, dude!" That was cool! That was very cool!

This was a less difficult case for her to handle and it made her feel like a good PSG member.

It's just that people who are still in school can't see past a certain point. It's like my problem, and there's a wall right behind my problem and I can't see anything beyond it. When you talk to older people, they can sort of like break down or chip out a brick from the wall. It's a small view but they can see through, you know. It's much easier.

Occasionally being a PSG member takes its toll on Anja but she has developed the ability to deal with this when it happens.

Sometimes I would just go home and lie on my bed and just cry because that's all I can do. I'm tired; I'm getting crap from my teachers, my friends, my academic work, my social life and then the PSG ... you get tired. You get so, so, so tired. And I would get home and just break down. It's not like I can't handle it, it's just that.

Breaking down, however, does not mean that Anja regrets being a PSG member.

It's my life motto: I want to help people. And I think because I sometimes break down like that, it just makes me feel like, "Okay, now

you've broken down, now it's okay, now I can go on and help even more people.”

Sometimes when you are having a crappy day you just have to cry or ... you know, I cry, other people might go out for a jog but you have to like have a release. You have to. And that happens in everyone's life, whatever you do. You have to have a release. Work, school, PSG, sport, anything. You have to focus but also at the same time you need just one hour, one minute, one second where you can just forget about everything and just get it out. Then you are so much better cause then you can just go on again.

Once a week the PSG meet to talk about their cases. Unfortunately, this does not always happen and Anja has a need to talk about her experiences. “We just like sit and talk nonsense; we don't really talk about anything around the PSG”.

I think if we had another weekend like the PSG camp. The first one being a training weekend and the second one being a release weekend where we all just talk about all the people that we've seen. We don't really speak about the PSG related stuff to each other. We know we can talk to each other if we need to but no one ever says, “Oh my gosh, I really need to talk about this.” So, if we went away to talk about these things then we would have opened up. I think that's something that [our supervisor] should do with the next group.

Anja would prefer going to talk to her supervisor when she has a difficult case to handle, rather than to talk about it in the PSG meetings.

Being a PSG member has helped Anja to cope with bad things that have happened in her own life.

I look at it from a much more objective point of view now ... more than I had before. Because you can see what's happening to all the other

people around you, you know so much more so when you look at yourself it's like, "Why am I even worried?" It's actually such a small little thing.

Claiming roles

For Anja, being a friend and being a PSG member is closely linked.

I think it's like equivalent to each other. It's on the same level because as a friend you are expected to listen to your friends' problems, you know; it's like one of the roles of a friend. But as a PSG member it's like basically the same thing. You deal with much more hectic things than you would in every day life.

If I know their background then it's hard for me to be a peer supporter because I know and it's just ... I don't know. But if it's like someone else you don't know who comes to you then it's easier.

When she is a PSG member, Anja experiences it has having no emotional attachment and as a mechanical practice. It is a different way of supporting someone. "I prefer being a friend. That's my personal opinion. But I still enjoy being a peer supporter but I prefer being a friend."

Negativity, and specifically jealousy, surrounds the PSG in the school as they are seen as an elite group. This reality makes it hard for Anja to cope with being a PSG member and being a friend. Sometimes her friends might think she is bragging about her duty as a PSG member when what she is actually doing is reaching out for someone to help her deal with difficult experiences in the PSG.

Her role as a PSG member is an aspect that Anja is clear on: she views herself as a sounding board for others.

I help people. I'm more just like a shoulder to cry on. Doesn't matter what happens, even if it's just like, "I bumped my toe"; I'm always there, like "Come cry on my shoulder". I'm not there to analyze, I'm not there to say, "But have you tried this? Or have you tried that?" I'm just there to listen. 'Cause it helps. When people just sit and listen to you, it helps. In itself. Because then when you say something and someone else listens, you listen too and you hear what you are saying, then everything just might become so much clearer.

Personal sources of guidance and support

Anja has many sources that she turns to for guidance and support.

My best friend! She's like there for me all the time. My boyfriend also. My mom and my step dad support me too. And my grandparents! And our supervisor and my computer because I write a lot. And my music. Everyone that supports me ... I can talk to them about anything and I know that they'll help me. If someone is nasty to me or if there's a problem with a teacher at school, even if I am the one that was in the wrong, my mom will always stand up for me, doesn't matter if I'm right or wrong. But then afterwards she will talk to me about it, you know. I don't know. You know when you have a connection with someone. I just know with these people.

Usefulness of peer support groups in schools

Having a PSG in a school, according to Anja, is an important element of any school.

If you have slept with a guy and you think you might be pregnant, you can't talk to your mom about it, she will smack you! You can't talk to your friends about it because they will sort of be like, "WHAT!" and look at you in a different way. You can't speak to the teachers, because the teachers are more corrupt than the kids are. So I think the PSG is a

very good thing because at least you know that you've got someone to go and talk to and you know that they aren't allowed to say anything and if they do it's big stories. I think it's a very, very, very important part of an academic institution.

Constructing research

Anja claims that she did not have any expectations when she decided to join the research process. "I just thought that this was something cool to do. Help out. Whatever. I prefer to not have expectations in life 'cause that just ruins the end product."

The researcher's role and her role as a participant are very clear cut for Anja.

You listen and you try to make me not swear! And not make all kinds of funny noises because then you have to type them! I don't know ... you research. I think all of us play a vital part. I think it's a very interesting thing to do because I know that everyone has different opinions of things and I think it gives you an advantage to have children of our age talking about children of our age. Instead of going to a psychologist and asking what 17-year-olds get up to, then it's an analysis of what we do. Meanwhile I can just give you the information straight up because I'm in contact with it every day.

The journaling was a difficult aspect for Anja to carry out. She would have preferred to express herself verbally and by means of music, instead of in written format.

It was hectic because I'm not the type of writer that talks about people. I write more about what's going on in my mind and in my life. But I don't write like, "Dear Diary ... Today I went to school and had sandwiches ...," you know? I write stuff like, "Trapped and confused I sit in this lonely world of mine thinking blah, blah, blah ..." So, it was

actually hard for me to do the journaling because I didn't really know what to say. I didn't really know how to put it into words. I can talk about it cause that's easy and I can talk like I write but I don't write like I talk. But I do that in a very abstract way, I don't write down, "I am sad. This is why I'm sad." I write down very deep and intense stuff that is very hard to explain. [Other ways of expressing would include] Talking. Just talking. Because I can't draw! And music too! Definitely. Like if I hear a song, it always brings back a memory or it creates a new one. And I associate a song with a person. That's easy.

All in all...

It's fun! I find it fun! It's like a real stress reliever. Everything I encounter I can just blurt out to you and just say everything! Get it off my chest. Then I can deal with it. Like I just said, hearing myself talking about it makes it clearer for me too.

Looking back

For Anja being a PSG member was a learning experience.

It wasn't a bad experience, it was a draining experience. But still one that I enjoyed. It's draining but it's an eye-opener.

[I learned that] that there are actually people in this world who are worse off than I am. People think because I always smile that everything is okay but I am actually very deep. And it was a good thing for me to know that there are people who are worse off. It made my problems look so small. And it made me cope with them better. It made me realize how privileged I really am.

There are people to fall back on, that it's not only you. You don't have to cope with everything by yourself. That you can go to someone if you want to talk or whatever. It's not just you. I think that's also a very big

lesson. Some people think it's just me, and it's not just you, it's everyone else and you.

But ...

I learned that I don't want to be a psychologist, ever. I won't be able to handle it because although I'm numb now, I think that if I see 20 people every day with different problems, I'd lose it! I'd totally lose it!

What I know now and if I would do that all over again ... like the camp I would do with pleasure, 'cause that was just fun and the connections I made, obviously. But I wouldn't be able to do it all over again, I won't. It gets too hectic for me 'cause I'm very emotional. And even though I have become numb, I'm still very emotional. It was fun while it lasted, but ...

I would recommend it 'cause it's a good learning experience, you know. Just not something I would like to go through again.

Anja's wisdom

To know that even one life has breathed easier because of you, that is to truly have succeeded.

You have to have a release. Work, school, PSG, sport, anything. You have to focus but also at the same time you need just one hour, one minute, one second where you can just forget about everything and just get it out. Then you are so much better 'cause then you can just go on again.

You don't have to cope with everything by yourself.

CHAPTER 7

REFLECTIONS OF THE RESEARCHER

Tell me a story of who you are,
And see who I am in the stories I am living.
And together we will remember that each of us always has a choice.
Oriah Mountain Dreamer (2001, p. 1)

In this chapter I explore my own experiences as a researcher throughout the research process. This includes how and when I first heard about peer support groups, how I experienced the PSG camp, reflections on becoming and being a researcher, exploring changes and effects, the roles I assumed during the research process, my own personal sources of guidance and support, my opinions on peer support, looking back over the research process and concluding thoughts.

This chapter was constructed from my own research journal I kept throughout the research process. Before writing this chapter, I re-read my journal and highlighted similar themes explored with the participants in chapters 4, 5 and 6. All the quotations in this chapter are, therefore, direct quotes from my research journal.

I was not prepared for all the challenges I would encounter as a researcher. But I was also not prepared for the many aspects I would come to know and appreciate about myself and my abilities.

Tracing the history

I first heard the phrase “Peer Support Groups” in my first year of master’s studies, when we were invited to a private school in Gauteng, South Africa. The school needed our assistance in supporting the Peer Support Group (PSG) members in a situation where they had to, in turn, support the students. The reason for this was that a suicide had taken place during the school holidays.

When we arrived at the school, we were briefed on the circumstances around the student's suicide. The specific grade group were divided into smaller groups, each with one or two PSG members. The purpose of this exercise was to give the students the opportunity to talk about what had happened and discuss their feelings around it. The organizers asked us to each sit with a PSG member and provide assistance when he or she experienced difficulties in the support process.

I was sitting in one of these groups, watching the PSG member lead the conversation by asking questions and reflecting on answers, thinking, "Wow! I'm impressed!" In the end I assisted the PSG member not more than twice. She was well prepared, she handled herself and the situation well, she was empathic and she really listened to what the students said. I was surprised and impressed at the same time.

When I drove away from the school that day, I started thinking and wondering about Peer Support Groups. When did they first surface? They were not around when I was at school. How are the PSG members selected and trained? How do they experience being PSG members? What kind of experiences do they encounter? I wanted to know more. For this reason I decided that I wanted to do research on peer support members for my dissertation.

When I started reading up on peer support, I realized that what interested me was how the students experienced being PSG members and the effect of these experiences on them. I decided that I wanted to explore this. When I approached the school psychologist who runs the PSG in the school we visited, she agreed that it would be interesting to study the PSG members' experiences and suggested that I join them on their training camp in order to get a better understanding and awareness of how the PSG system operates.

At the beginning of this year I therefore started planning the research process and one of the first steps in this process was the PSG camp.

Gone camping

An exciting weekend lay ahead as I was looking forward to finally starting my research. Going camping with two psychologists, a teacher and 18 Peer Support Group members was the first step. I thought to myself, “I am taking my first step as a researcher, going into the field and doing research. I am entering this field not as a psychologist but as a researcher.”

Uncertainty found its way into my thoughts at times as I was unsure how to approach this new role I was taking on. At this stage I decided to define my role for this weekend as that of a participant observer doing research: I would mostly observe but also participate in conversations.

What exactly am I supposed to do here? On our way here [to the camp] the organizers asked me to also give input and opinions and teach the students what I have learned from experience. But I am not a teacher. I will share my experiences with them but ultimately they will have their own experiences in which they will have to make their own decisions.

I expected this process to be demanding and challenging at times but that I would gain satisfaction from completing this project. Expectations aside, I decided that I was going to let whatever should happen, happen. I had no control over what I would learn from these students or from this experience, therefore, “What will be, will be”.

Looking at the students made me think of when I was an adolescent not too long ago. “What do they see when they look at me? A psychologist? A researcher? I did not feel like one. Did they feel like PSG members? Would they after this weekend?”

It seemed to me like everyone was trying to find a companion in this new group that had come together only the previous week. All of them came from different groups at school and were now thrown together to create a new

one. “A Peer Support Group. 18 Students chosen by their peers to support their peers. Was this a big responsibility? I think so. Did they realize this? I do not think so.”

The purpose of this getaway weekend was for the PSG members to get to know themselves on a personal level and to teach them certain basic counselling skills. They did certain exercises that each had a lesson to teach behind it.

The first day’s exercises included the following:

- Creating a group painting on a white canvas, with the purpose of establishing a bond between the group members and group cohesion
- Dancing to music with closed eyes and just being, with the purpose of focusing on themselves
- Guided imagery where everyone was guided into identifying an animal in their mind’s eye that would ultimately represent their personality
- Massaging one another to get into close physical contact with each other and learn to trust each other.

At this stage, I was still seen as an outsider and I suppose I also saw myself as one. I started to think of ways in which I could physically include myself in the group and engage in the processes of training and research simultaneously. This was important for me as I wanted to get a better understanding of what the participants were experiencing, and for the research paradigm of social constructionism used in this study, which states that the researcher is part of the research process. So, I decided to join them.

While the PSG members were painting the canvas I sat away from the group, observing. Everyone seems to be painting a piece of themselves. Some of them exchanged uncertain smiles with me. How was I going to engage in this process? Although I am not much older

than them, I still feel old. I have to determine what wave length they are on in order for me to get to a point where I can have conversations with them.

Entering the world of the PSG members and building a relationship with them were difficult to accomplish. It might be that at this stage the PSG members themselves were still in the process of constructing their world as PSG members and I was still in the process of constructing how and if I would fit into this world. It might be that I had difficulty accessing the system as the system consisted of adolescents who, due to a general assumption, do not always mix with people outside of their groups. Finding an identity for myself in the group was also difficult to achieve. I am older than them and I am not a PSG member or a teacher. To them, I am an outsider entering their personal space. Whatever the reason, I wanted to establish a certain relationship and I was working towards that.

With the second exercise of the day, the dancing, I made my move and joined them.

The dancing was weird! The music was weird! I felt weird dancing with eyes closed and focusing on myself and what I'm experiencing. I was here to focus on them, not on myself! It was difficult to let go and to concentrate on just being. I wondered what everyone else was thinking about and if they also struggled to focus on themselves.

The third exercise, guided imagery, was welcome after the dancing. The facilitator presented the exercise in such a way that we understood exactly what was expected of us. I enjoyed it.

We all lay on our backs with our eyes closed. The facilitator first relaxed us and then guided us to eventually identifying an animal in our mind's eye – an animal that would later on prove to be very significant to each of us because as the weekend progressed we could see why each of us had seen that specific animal. The animal reflected our own

personalities and beliefs about ourselves. For me it was interesting to see, as the weekend progressed, how each of the animals fitted with the specific person.

The last exercise for the day was one where the PSG members had to choose a person of any gender that they have not had a real conversation with and to take turns in massaging each other.

I did not take part in the last exercise. I decided to rather observe this one. I thought that it might be difficult for them but I was pleasantly surprised to see that none of them had a problem massaging the other. They chatted easily with each other and I could see that trust was starting to develop between them.

I suppose it was easier for them to enter into this trusting relationship as they at this stage knew each other better than they knew me. They were familiar to each other and from their point of view I was not one of them. I still had to earn their trust.

In my opinion the second day's exercises were more challenging for the PSG members and had a different impact on me. Earlier that week the group was told to each bring to camp a metaphorical object that represents themselves in some way.

The objects they brought and how they related it to themselves left me amazed. I was again reminded of when I was a teenager and I wondered if I would have been able to choose an object and relate it metaphorically to myself at that age. I don't think I knew myself half as well as these students do when I was their age.

For many of them it was hard to talk about themselves and others were saddened. Some of them had a profound effect on me too.

I was surprised at the effect some of the metaphors had on me, as I am usually very composed in a therapeutic situation. But this was different. I thought long and hard about the strong effect some of their stories had had on me and came to the conclusion that this was not similar to a therapeutic situation, it was a situation where I got to know the intimate stories of 18 kids who have had to deal with difficult situations in their short lives. On some level I knew and understood what they were going through and how tough it can be to evaluate yourself and your life. I looked at them and I wished that I had been so brave and wise to, at 16/17 years of age, sit down and evaluate my life, what had happened to me, how I had changed and grown and what I did with the bad things that had happened in my life.

After this exercise, I was drained and it seemed to me like everyone was. I needed to rest and to digest everything that happened. Many questions went through my mind while I was lying on my bed.

Did they feel better now, having shared intimate details of their personal lives with each other? Did they regret this? Were they as drained as I was? Were they surprised by each other's stories? What was the impact of their stories on each other? What was the impact it made on me? Did or will their stories change them? Or me?

I did not have all the answers but when we met up with each other again after our afternoon nap, I sensed that something was different.

When we got together again after that draining exercise, it felt to me as if the sharing exercise brought everyone closer together. I could sense that a bond was created. It is strange how sharing can sometimes bring people together and other times pull them apart. In this case it definitely brought them together.

The rest of the exercises were set up to give the PSG members the opportunity to practise basic counselling skills. This included asking personal

and open questions and probing. An open question, I remembered from Psych 101, is a question that opens up possibilities and does not require a yes or no answer.

As I sat there, supervising a group, I realized how many years I have been counselling people and practising these exact skills. It has become second nature to me and I suddenly felt proud of how much I actually have learned in my own training as a psychologist. By teaching them how to counsel someone, forced me to think about things that came naturally to me when I was in a counselling situation. Giving advice is something they all struggled with and it was difficult for me to get them to listen and ask questions without solving everything that is wrong in the other person's life!

Driving back the following day, I wondered and asked the organiser if the PSG members would get any additional training.

I feel like they still need to learn so much, they have only touched the tip of the iceberg. I realize that the point of the PSG is not to turn them into little psychologists but still I think they need to learn how to handle tough situations in a concrete way as handling it in an abstract way did not make sense to them yet. I was told that they would receive continuous training throughout the year on matters such as suicide and eating disorders and whenever cases got too hard for them to handle that the school psychologist would take over from there. This answer satisfied my thoughts and while we were driving home I wondered who of them would volunteer for my research project.

On becoming a researcher

Three very different but interesting PSG members volunteered for this research project.

I met with the three participants today. We talked about what I planned for the project and they seemed excited and enthusiastic about it. I have to admit that I was relieved to see their enthusiasm as I do not want them to see this project as a burden. They now know what it is all about and they are free to withdraw at any time.

My expectations at this stage included acquiring three different accounts of PSG experiences from the participants.

The three participants differ quite a lot. I think it is a good thing as it will give me three very different descriptions and/or stories about their experiences. It keeps things interesting. And it will keep the reader (and hopefully the researcher!) interested in the process.

After the first meeting, I found myself feeling relieved and reassured that I could trust the three of them enough to give me valuable research material. I expected that the research process would inevitably have an effect on all of us. At this stage though, I did not know what that effect would be.

Exploring changes and effects

Writing a master's dissertation certainly and without a doubt built my self-confidence as a researcher.

Before starting the research process I wondered if I would be able to effectively do what was expected of me. I knew that I would be able to conduct interviews but I wondered if I would be capable of writing a great big master's dissertation. I think these thoughts crept into my mind because I was uncertain of how I would approach this whole thing. When I started planning and breaking the "big things" into smaller, reachable goals things started to look different. I now thought that this was not *that* big of a deal. But reality has a funny way of striking when you least expect it. Whenever I would convince myself that this is "not that bad" or "not that big" my supervisor would bring me

back to earth and ground me firmly. Which is a good thing, I think. To have someone who keeps you grounded. Breaking big things down into smaller steps is also a good thing but the smaller steps still take a lot of hard work and dedication and patience.

The research process also tested my patience.

I know patience is a virtue but sometimes I just want to finish this thing and get it over with! I know now why they [the university] give you such a long time to finish a dissertation: because it takes so long to finish it and do a good job.

These interviews take such a long time to transcribe. It's time consuming. Sometimes I can't even hear what was said on the tape recorder and I have to listen over and over to make sense of it. It is so frustrating!

Being a researcher has given me the opportunity to develop and get to know a part of myself better. A part that I did not know existed.

I learned how to be a researcher throughout this process. I don't think that I am a complete and perfect researcher but at least I now know what I am capable of and that I can be a researcher if I wanted to.

The research process has built my self-confidence, tried and tested my patience and taught me how to be a researcher. From a narrative perspective the researcher is inevitably transformed by the research process. I was certainly transformed.

Reflections on being a researcher

I was anxious about conducting the first interviews, as this was my first time I was doing an interview as a researcher. As the interview progressed I relaxed more.

I was nervous at first but when we started talking I relaxed and I realized that there was nothing to be nervous about. After all, I was just having conversations with PSG members about their experiences, thoughts and feelings. There was nothing to be nervous about.

By the time I had conducted all three individual interviews I was more comfortable with my position as a researcher. I was looking forward to the focus group and curious about how the focus group would differ from the individual interviews. I have to admit that I was afraid that I might run out of questions to ask; fortunately this did not happen.

The group dynamics [in the focus group] were fascinating. Some of the participants were a bit more talkative than others but we made group rules beforehand that we would give each other a chance to speak and not interrupt the other person. I also made a point of asking everyone's opinion before moving on to the next question and even at times giving my own opinion. However, a pattern developed where the more talkative participant would answer the question first and I had to ask for the other two participants' opinions. I was afraid that they would comply with what the first one was saying but fortunately this was not the case. Each of them shared his or her own viewpoints or just added to the others. The conversation flow was easygoing and I never ran out of questions like I originally thought I would.

Transcribing the individual interviews and focus group was a different challenge compared to conducting the interviews.

I have to transcribe every single word that was uttered in the interviews ... On the one hand, this is so boring and it takes such a long time! And then again it puts things into perspective for me. I can experience the interviews for the second time and really get a good look at what was said and what was not said. I also get the chance to laugh at myself

for some of the questions I asked and fight with myself for not asking other questions that are so obvious to me now. “Why did I ask this and not that?” or “I should have asked this instead of that.”

The second set of individual interviews and focus group were less stressful and I was not as nervous as the first time around.

I don't know if it is because I was so relaxed but it seemed like the participants were also more comfortable. The two participants that were less talkative in the first focus group talked a little more in the second one. Maybe it was because they knew what to expect from the process and from me. Maybe that was also why I was more relaxed.

Transcribing the second set of interviews and focus group went more quickly than the first set. I again appreciated the fact that I had the chance to listen to the interviews for a second time and read what happened in the conversations on paper.

The second set of transcriptions is going faster than the first. Strange how you get into a routine and things speed up this way. I think I have lots of material to work with and I look forward to writing the stories of the participants.

Writing the participants' stories and my own was enjoyable for me. This part of the research process I enjoyed the most.

At first I did not know where to start [writing the stories]. And then when I started writing I could not stop! Everything just flowed and fell into place. I did not expect this to go so easily and quickly. It still took time but it was not as exhausting as doing the literature review and methodology.

The writing of the stories signalled that the end of the research process was nearing. Everything was coming together.

Claiming roles

For the most part of this research project I assumed the role of a researcher. It was a new role for me and one I did not always know how to engage with.

It's not easy for me to be a researcher. No one tells you where to start and what to do. You just do what you think is right. And it is stressful at times, like when you have to formulate sentences in academic language so that it sounds more academic and formal. I find that difficult. It's easier to write down my thoughts and the way I think. But maybe it is good for me to develop this side of myself too. Now I know what I am capable of and it is so much more than I originally thought.

When this project started out the participants also saw me as a researcher. As the project progressed and the participants and I got to know each other better, my role became more than that of a researcher. In some ways I became a friend and in other ways, a mentor. Many times after the individual interviews were recorded or the discussions about the research journals were done, we would have conversations about things other than peer support.

I did not expect this to happen but today after one of the individual interviews, the participant started sharing personal things with me. She was concerned about something that happened and was afraid of what the consequences of her actions might be. We talked for a while and it seemed like she found clarity in the conversation.

In one of the journal entries, the participant talks about difficult things that she is currently experiencing. I am not sure if I should talk to her about it but if she didn't want to share it, why did she write it in the journal for me to read?

I went to talk to the participant [who wrote her personal difficulties in the journal] today. I can't take on the role or responsibility of a therapist so I referred her to another therapist. She seemed surprised at first that I would bring it up but when I left she told me that she is very grateful that I took the time to talk to her about this. I felt better when I heard this as I wasn't sure if I had done the right thing.

It seems that the participants took their roles of supporters further during the research process.

I went through a stressful time the past few days. Yesterday, I saw the participants to talk about research stuff and one of them asked if I was okay. I was taken aback at first as I didn't realize that I was wearing my feelings on my sleeve again but I shared my worries with them and they actually started supporting me! I did not expect this at all. I appreciated them listening to my worries. It was as if the roles were reversed for a while.

Naturally, I was also a student during the research process.

I am constantly learning in this [research] process. I don't always know what to do and what to write. There is a reason why they assign supervisors to students who have to do research and write dissertations. I would have been lost otherwise.

In the final stages of this dissertation, I also assumed the role of an author.

Being a writer or an author is difficult and easy depending on what you write. For example, writing the stories of the participants and my own was enjoyable but writing in academic language and creating a flowing story within the literature review were difficult for me. But it was something that had to be done and I did it. I surprised myself in the end as I sometimes wondered if I would actually get to the point where I would be able to stand back and look at the final product.

I assumed different roles during this research project. Some were difficult roles while others were easy. At times it was difficult to assume or even maintain a certain role. There is a similarity between this process and the PSG members also assuming a new role: that of PSG members. I had difficulty determining what my role in this process was and so did they. It seems that at times we all wavered between and experimented with different roles. This idea of different strands woven together to create a story and constituting our identities correlates with the narrative paradigm. It is not always simple to separate them or to fix our identities.

Throughout this research process and the difficulties I experienced concerning changes and roles, I needed the support and encouragement of others to assist me.

Personal sources of guidance and support

I am in the fortunate position of having many personal sources of guidance and support.

My parents have supported me through almost seven years of study and are still always there for me when I need to blow off steam about this or that or when the pressure becomes too much. So has my fiancé [now husband]. He keeps me grounded and positive. Throughout the literature study, the transcription of interviews, the compiling of

chapters, drafts and wrapping up the whole process, he listened to my complaining, moaning and groaning.

Colleagues and friends also supported me through this process.

My friends talk to me and enquire about how the research process is going. I appreciate that but I sometimes wonder if they really know what goes into such a project. I think you only know when you do one yourself. Only then can you really understand and appreciate the work, dedication and self-discipline that go into a dissertation. But they have another advantage: they understand me. They know how to handle the situation if I'm stressed or irritated or upset. And I've experienced those emotions quite a lot during this process. That is the part they know how to handle and that's what I appreciate.

Finally, I cannot not mention my supervisor.

I don't know where I would have started, how I would have constructed and created this dissertation without my supervisor. Whenever I want to know how to do something she encourages me to find the answer for myself. She doesn't tell me the answer. Sometimes this frustrates me but I know she does this so that I can learn how to do it myself but still ... sometimes I just want her to give me the answer and spare me the mission of finding the answer myself.

She keeps me grounded and humble in a sense. Whenever I finish writing a chapter and I sit back and think, "This is good work!", and I send it to her and it comes back with so many changes and constructive criticism ... it's frustrating! But it is also necessary for me to deliver my best work. She makes sure of that!

It seems that my experience of supervision differs considerably from the PSG members' experience of it. Supervision is important to me as it gives me direction in the research process. In my opinion, the PSG members received inadequate supervision and therefore it was difficult for them to know which direction to take and how to handle difficult situations. When I was an adolescent, I thought I knew everything and I would not always ask for assistance when I needed it. It might also be that they did not want to ask for assistance and that they thought they could handle the difficult situations themselves. Or maybe peer pressure played a part in that none of their fellow PSG members asked for help and therefore they also did not.

Usefulness of peer support groups in schools

In my opinion peer support groups are useful in schools.

The PSG members perform a valuable service. I know from personal experience that teenagers don't always want to speak to a teacher or a parent when they experience difficulties. Therefore I think it's a good thing to have the opportunity to speak to a peer who is trained in basic counselling skills and knows how to deal with other people's problems.

I did, however, become aware of some disadvantages to being a PSG member, which troubled me considerably.

I think the PSG members need to have more supervision sessions and need to be monitored more closely. And more training. It seems to me that they don't always know how to handle certain situations and it gets to them. They also don't always seem know how to handle themselves in a counselling situation. I mean this in the sense that they don't know where their own persona ends and the PSG member begins. They don't seem to know how to construct important boundaries between them and other people's problems.

They [the PSG members] are not coping well. They need to be supported themselves! Someone needs to show them how to handle these situations! Are they not asking for help? Are they not getting any help?

Conversations with the PSG members lead me to assume that their supervision needs are not adequately met. However, a conversation with the school and supervising psychologist brought about new considerations.

I spoke to the school psychologist today and she explained to me that the PSG members get together every Wednesday during break, where they have the opportunity to discuss difficult cases as a group. According to the school psychologist there is too little time to cover everyone's questions and therefore she also tells them to come and speak to her about difficult cases on a one-on-one basis at any time. However, she is of the opinion that the PSG members did not make sufficient use of this service. And if they don't come to speak to her, she assumes they are doing fine.

I was confused after this conversation. Were the situation and the importance of supervision thoroughly explained to them at the beginning of their duty year? Were the PSG members too proud or scared to ask for help? Even if they were too shy to admit they had a difficult case on their hands, they still could have gone to speak to the school psychologist on their own. Why didn't they? Is there a communication gap somewhere?

I am not at liberty to say where the communication lines between the school psychologist and the PSG members went awry. I can create a number of plausible scenarios. Nevertheless, I still believe peer support is useful and valuable in schools if the programme is implemented properly and the peer supporters are closely monitored and supported throughout their duty year.

Looking back

The PSG camp was a highlight for me.

The camp was where the research process started and I took my first steps as a researcher. It gave me the chance to share important memories and experiences with the PSG members. I had the chance to see and hear their fears, their sorrow and their pain. They shared their stories with me and with each other. It really had an impact on me.

Spending time with the three participants on a formal (interviews and focus groups) and an informal (after the interviews and focus groups) basis was enjoyable.

I didn't expect my relationship with the three participants to evolve to more than a researcher-participant one. Many times after the interviews or focus groups we would keep on chatting about stuff like school, friends, significant others, parents, and the future. This tells me that they see me as more than a researcher. They see me as a confidant too.

Taking this into account, it seems that adolescents have difficulty in surviving the many changes that occur during this developmental stage, and therefore require assistance from more experienced people they can trust. They need someone to talk to and share their difficulties with. Maybe because their needs in terms of adequate supervision were not met, they turned to me for a supervising role. I became more than a researcher to them.

Reflecting on relationships with the participants and the researcher

Through the research process I had the opportunity to come to know three peer supporters and share their experiences with them. From a narrative psychology point of view, a narrative researcher has personal vulnerability. This means that the researcher is interested in maintaining a relationship with the participants but the author also needs to assume interpretive authority in writing up the research (Diemert Moch, 2000). In this sense, the researcher's role is expanded to that of an author the moment he or she begins to write up the research. Diemert Moch (2000) also believes that it is important to recognize the significance of dialogue with self, participants and others in the research process.

Many relationships were formed in this research process. From a social constructionist perspective, meaning is created within relationships (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). Therefore, the relationships between researcher and the participants are a significant part of the research process. Here the researcher discusses only relationships of which she herself was part. There are many other relationships, for example relationships among the participants, but these relationships can only be sufficiently described by the participants themselves. Therefore, the researcher discusses relationships between herself and each of the participants, relationships between herself and the participants as a group and finally the relationship with herself as a researcher.

Joshua and Anize

The relationship that developed between Joshua and I was a more reserved one. Joshua truly focused only on his experiences as a PSG member and described them to me with clarity and precision. He did not mention personal issues or let his personal issues interfere with his duty as a PSG member.

Our conversations were lengthy, detailed, polite, honest and humorous. It seems to me that Joshua is someone who is in control of his feelings most of the time. He experiences anger, frustration and sadness but keeps them under control, in front of me at least. I can identify more with this as I am also more reserved regarding personal issues. I respected his reserved attitude and did not probe too much into his personal life.

Joshua focuses on other people more than he does on himself. He would always enquire about how things were with me and how I was doing. I appreciated this and it added to my understanding of our relationship as a polite and inquiring one.

Irene and Anize

The relationship that developed between me and Irene was open and sincere. I was more than a researcher to her as she too shared personal issues with me.

Our conversations were extensive, philosophical, humorous and nostalgic. In her own quiet way she let me into her world and into her thoughts. She was guarded and at the same time trusted me enough to share everything. Her selective guardedness made me more careful about asking too personal questions. She was more willing and did communicate personal issues with me in her journal later on in the research process.

However, her communication style changed when we entered a group setting where she would become less talkative and responsive. I needed to probe and encourage more participation on her part in a group setting than in the individual interviews.

Anja and Anize

A trusting relationship developed between the two of us through the course of the research process. It seems that from the start Anja viewed me as more than a researcher as she shared personal issues with me as early as the first interview. By personal issues I mean aspects of herself which are not directly related to peer support.

Our conversations were comfortable, humorous, nostalgic and honest. It seemed as if she was showing me exactly who Anja is, not hiding any aspect of herself. She was enthusiastic and willing to share her experiences as a PSG member. She described and at times even acted out everything about her experiences, thoughts and feelings. She was not afraid to say that certain cases reminded her of painful things in her own life and that this made her feel incompetent to deal with that case. She was honest about when something frustrated her, angered her, saddened her, or when something made her happy.

I appreciated this honesty and openness in our relationship. Sometimes I was in awe of how comfortable she was sharing certain aspects with me without holding back. I contribute this “being in awe of her” to the fact that I am not someone who is always willing to share everything about myself with others. Her openness, in turn, led to me exploring some of her personal issues too and not only focusing on her experiences as a PSG member.

I sense that towards the end Anja’s interest in the research project lessened somewhat. The conversations we had towards the end were shorter and more to the point than earlier ones. It might be that she felt too overwhelmed by everything going on in her life (such as the PSG, her studies, personal issues) and that she felt her enthusiasm for the research project diminish as she had other things to focus her attention on.

Joshua, Irene, Anja and Anize

The dynamics in this relationship differed somewhat from the one-on-one relationships. In the group setting, Anja took the lead most of the time. She was the one who would answer the questions first and voice her opinion first. However, in the second focus group she was less bold than in the first one.

Irene was less talkative in the group setting. I had to ask for her opinion on certain matters many times. It was as if she was less inclined to share her experiences, thoughts and feelings with the other participants present.

Joshua was more talkative than Irene but less talkative than in the individual interviews. He would readily voice his opinion but gave the other participants the opportunity to voice theirs first.

The relationship between the participants and me was different than in the individual interviews. It seemed as if everyone intensified the behaviour they demonstrated in the individual interviews. Anja became more bold and outspoken, Irene became quieter while Joshua became more reserved.

Anize and Anize

My relationship with myself took on many forms. At times I frustrated myself and got mad at myself, other times I surprised and even impressed myself.

Sometimes I laughed, sometimes I cried. I suppose it is all part of the learning process as well as the research process.

Through this research process, I came to know and developed a part of me that I did not know before. It opened my eyes to a new aspect of myself. I developed a relationship with this new aspect of myself. I have to admit that

doubt and uncertainty played a part in this relationship but with time and to a certain extent understanding and insight developed and they wiped away the first two.

As I mentioned before, I am richer having had this experience. From a social constructionist viewpoint (Gergen & Gergen, 1991), I was inevitably part of and transformed through this research process.

Different relationships developed between the participants and me, the researcher. Nonetheless, all their contributions were rich and valuable and assisted me in exploring their experiences in a useful way. My experiences throughout this research process assisted me in exploring my development as a researcher.

Concluding thoughts

Doing this research project has taught me many things.

It has been an enriching experience. An experience that sometimes made me doubt my abilities as a researcher, tried my patience, gave me self-confidence, even drove me crazy at times but, in the end, made me believe again that I am capable of anything when I put my mind to it (and with a little help from my friends!).

I am richer having had this experience.

CHAPTER 8

EVALUATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I have reached no conclusions, have erected no boundaries
Shutting out and shutting in, separating inside
from outside: I have
drawn no lines:
as
manifold events of sand
change the dunes' shape that will not be the same shape tomorrow,

so I am willing to go along, to accept
the becoming
thought, to stake off no beginnings or ends, establish
no walls.

A.R. Ammons (in Gergen &
Kaye, 1993, p. 241)

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences, thoughts and feelings of three peer supporters, or PSG members as they are commonly known in the school where the research was conducted.

To achieve the above stated aim, two individual interviews with each of the participants, two focus groups with all three participants present and the keeping of journals were implemented. I then arranged the research material by constructing relevant themes and discussing the participants' views under these themes. The participants evaluated their stories as told by me, the researcher, to ensure authentication of the narratives. The outcome was four comprehensive stories reflecting the participants' realities as well as my own.

In this final chapter, I evaluate the strengths and limitations of this study, summarize the findings of the study and make recommendations on peer support systems in the school at which the research was conducted and in schools in general. Finally, I explore recommendations for future research in this regard.

Evaluation of the study

Strengths of the study

Most of the research conducted on peer support to date (Cartwright, 2005; Cowie & Hutson, 2005; Cowie & Sharp, 1996; Cowie & Wallace, 2000; Cowie et al., 2002; Visser, 2004; etc) has been conducted in a quantitative way. This means that the researchers set out to measure something, in most cases the effectiveness of peer support systems in schools. This study, on the other hand, was conducted in a qualitative way. This means that I studied a real-world situation in openness and detail, as it unfolded naturally (Durrheim, 1999; Schurink, 1998). Approaching the study in this way gave me the freedom to explore the reality of insiders in the peer support system and to try to understand the participants instead of explaining their behaviour (Schurink, 1998). As the study (chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7) shows, I was able to explore the reality of the three peer supporters in openness and detail, without attempting to explain their behaviour.

Using postmodernism, social constructionism and narrative psychology simultaneously as a framework for this study provided a space in which to construct the research process and the stories emerging from the conversations. Postmodernism encourages multiple perspectives, which were obtained through this research process. From a social constructionist and narrative psychology viewpoint, the participants and I constructed our realities, and therefore meaning, together through the sharing of stories or narratives. Therefore, it would seem that I achieved what I initially set out to do, which was to collaboratively construct and explore narratives around the experiences of three peer supporters.

I made use of what Kelly (1999b) refers to as “methodological triangulation”, which entailed using the individual unstructured interviews together with focus groups and the writing of narratives. This was useful as I gained more information and richer descriptions than by using only one of

these as a source of information. Although similar issues presented themselves in both the individual interviews and the focus groups, I experienced some of the participants as more open, honest and talkative in the individual interviews than in the focus groups. Journaling gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in a comfortable and private environment, which gave me another perspective on their experiences, one that was not influenced by other voices. I believe that it was valuable to make use of all three methods of gathering research material.

Reflexivity (Steier, 1991) can be considered a strength in this study and was used in such a way that I reflected on the stories of the participants as well as my own story. This allowed me to add another dimension to the research material as well as multiple perspectives. These multiple perspectives also resonate with the emphasis of postmodernism, that no interpretations are “essentially true” and that any given story can be interpreted in many different ways (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

By conducting this study I have added to the minimal body of research on peer support in South Africa (Mattheus, 2002).

Limitations of the study

As I made use of applied research, the level of generalization only applies to this specific context (Durrheim, 1999). I am therefore not in a position to generalize the findings and apply them to all PSG members. These experiences are personal and only applicable to the three PSG members in this study and to the researcher.

Some of the participants found it difficult to keep a journal on their experiences, thoughts and feelings around peer support. Journaling is a useful concept (Rakel, 2004; Wilber, 2002) but it can be constructed in many different ways, for example, peer supporters keeping journals on their development as peer supporters differs considerably from keeping a personal

diary. I presented a training session on journaling to the participants. In hindsight, however, it might have been more useful to explore journaling further with the participants as all of them did not fully grasp the idea behind journaling.

Summary of findings and recommendations

Every story told in this study is but one interpretation and every reader reading this dissertation can and will construct his or her own interpretation of this research process. However, I identified certain main themes that constitute the different stories and that are of significance to me as a researcher. The findings will be summarized according to these themes.

Using these same themes, recommendations are made. As the findings are only generalized to this specific context, these are only suggested guidelines for the school at which this study was conducted and, tentatively, for schools in general.

Training

At the beginning of this study the participants were promised that, apart from the PSG camp, they would receive continuous training throughout their duty year on topics such as eating disorders and suicide. Aside from the presentation on eating disorders the peer supporters had to present to the grade 8s and 9s, continuous training is an aspect that did not come to pass. And one that the participants were and still are in desperate need of.

Irene emphasizes, “I do need more training to handle it [a suicide case] in a better way next time.” Joshua also states, “I think I need training on how to handle those things [suicide case] if they come my way. Because some things I don’t think I’ll be able to handle.” Anja agrees with them

I do [need more training]. And I think we all need to learn how to stress down. I can feel myself getting more tired every day. I feel like we've had so much stress and stuff and our workload from school is tremendous, huge! Everything just adds up and you've got so much on your plate and it just gets too much. I think we all need to relax a bit.

I therefore recommend that peer supporters receive continuous training in various aspects of psychology. This includes training on how to handle a case of someone having difficulties with eating, suicide, unstable moods, substance abuse, or emotional, physical or sexual abuse at home.

I also recommend that the supervisors or teachers organize stress management workshops for peer supporters. This would empower them to manage various stressors more effectively.

On this point I want to add that giving additional and continuous training might have the effect of turning peer supporters into teenage psychologists in a sense. According to Cox (1999), as discussed in chapter 2, peer supporting is less intense and more superficial than therapy. Although peer supporting is similar to professional therapy, I do not therefore think that this is the aim of peer supporting. I therefore propose that basic training on the above-mentioned topics should be done so that the peer supporters are able to recognize when a case becomes too intense and refer the student to a professional. The implication of this is that the peer supporter then becomes more of a referral agent in instances where the case demands more professional expertise.

Supervision

It appears that the participants did not receive regular supervision on the cases that were presented to them. Anja mentioned, “[When we get together once a week] we just like sit and talk nonsense; we don't really talk

about anything around the PSG” and “We don’t really speak about the PSG related stuff to each other.”

Irene claimed, “Our supervisor is not giving us all that much support. She has a lot of other stuff on her plate. Because she started this whole thing and because she is the school counsellor she should be more involved.”

The PSG members in this study had many aspects of being an adolescent that they had to deal with. Apart from physical, cognitive, moral, affective, personality and social challenges typical of adolescent development, they had to additionally take on the role of a PSG member and grow into this role. It appears that this was an immense challenge for them.

From the school psychologist’s point of view, there were multiple opportunities for the PSG members to speak to her about difficult cases, which rarely happened. If the PSG members did not approach her she assumed they were coping on their own. Therefore, they had to use their own discretion and initiative to speak to her.

Whatever the reason for the discrepancy between the two views, supervision of the PSG members is an important part of a successful peer support system. Cowie and Wallace (2000) and Cartwright (2005) recommend that peer supporters receive regular supervision on their experiences and continuous support from their teachers. Supervision can take the form of individual or group supervision (Cowie & Wallace, 2000), which both have their advantages and disadvantages, as described in chapter 2. Group supervision can be more economical in terms of time and add to group cohesiveness but peer supporters might occasionally need individual supervision on difficult cases that affect them personally.

In my opinion, supervision in any form (Cowie & Wallace, 2000) is essential for peer supporters to be successful in their own supporting roles as it gives them an opportunity to discuss their cases and their thoughts and feelings around them.

I therefore recommend that peer supporters receive weekly group supervision to discuss their cases, the difficulties around them and the peer supporters' thoughts and feelings about the cases. The group can in this sense serve as a support structure for the peer supporters. I also recommend individual supervision from time to time, as certain cases might elicit personal issues for them.

Supervision should preferably be performed by a registered psychologist. If this is not possible, I would recommend that a teacher be trained by a registered psychologist in the necessary supervision skills, in order for him or her to then support the peer supporters in this regard. The psychologist or teacher that takes on this role should be able to facilitate conversations about the relevant cases and direct these conversations so that the group stays on course. It would also be important for the supervisor to recognize when a PSG member is not coping and to provide the opportunity for him or her to withdraw from the PSG.

Constructing roles and boundaries

The participants had trouble discerning where their roles as friends started and their roles as peer supporters began. They had trouble differentiating their roles as peer supporters and staying within these boundaries. Joshua states, "For me the PSG Joshua and the friend Joshua is pretty much the same." Irene claims

I think you make the same vow as a PSG member and as a friend and that is to help people who need your help. As you help someone, whether it's a friend or not, you learn things about that person that ties you two together. I think to have boundaries helps to a certain extent but it should not take over your life. [When you want to be friends with the person you are supporting] the boundaries and structures fall away. You have to assess the risk and then decide for yourself.

Finally, Anja asserts

I think it's like equivalent to each other. It's on the same level because as a friend you are expected to listen to your friends' problems, you know; it's like one of the roles of a friend. But as a PSG member it's like basically the same thing. You deal with much more hectic things then you would in every day life.

Clearly identifying their roles as peer supporters would assist them in not giving advice to the students they counsel and support, as this is not part of their role as peer supporters. Giving advice to someone would imply the person giving the advice taking on the role of a teacher. Joshua experienced difficulties with giving advice: "I found it very hard to not tell him what I thought he should do" Anja also found this difficult: "It's very hard not to give advice."

Identifying roles and giving advice are closely linked to the participants' training as peer supporters, as these are matters that should be explained to them in their training. I would recommend that they should have more opportunities to practise being peer supporters with role-plays. Given this, they would be able to readily recognise when they are overstepping the boundaries into friendship and teaching roles.

For schools that do not have the resources to implement formal peer support systems with proper supervision, befriending is another possibility. As discussed in chapter 2, befriending is a more informal approach to peer support. The peer supporters are still trained in basic counselling skills but approach the person as a friend as opposed to approaching the person on a formal basis. This approach might have implications in terms of boundaries, which means that the peer supporter is still only "someone to talk to" and a friendship as such is not necessarily established. Although this is a more informal approach, the peer supporters still maintain a distance from the people they support, in order to protect themselves from getting emotionally involved.

Keeping up the momentum of the PSG through social and PSG related gatherings

At the PSG camp a bond was created between the peer supporters. This bond weakened when the peer supporters returned from the camp and as the year progressed. As the bond weakened, motivation and enthusiasm also diminished. Irene claims that

We used to have like this bond and when I look back at the camp there are so many memories but now I don't know at school things are not the same anymore. I was so scared that that was going to happen and it did. We kind of drifted apart. And that is really sad for me because I know the point of the PSG is not really to make the PSG best friends but that's just what happened. But now we're growing apart.

A group can easily fall apart when there is no sense of cohesiveness. Being part of a group gives a person a sense of belonging. In terms of peer support, the group of peer supporters serve as a support system for each other. This is important and adds to their well-being.

In my opinion, the PSG camp is valuable in the implementation of peer support systems in any school. The camp creates an opportunity for the peer supporters to get to know each other on a personal level and away from their friends at school.

I therefore recommend that organizers create opportunities for peer supporters to perform group exercises and group presentations on psychology-related topics. This would give them the opportunity to work together as a group and would also redefine their role to that of psycho-educators. They could present workshops to their peers on various aspects such as those mentioned before. The impact of this would be twofold as the peer supporters would inform others while informing themselves as well. This

role of psycho-educators would still be supportive but less stressful than that of peer supporting.

Furthermore, peer supporters should be given the opportunity to socialize together as a group as this also adds to group cohesiveness and gives the peer supporters an opportunity to get to know each other on a more personal level.

Usefulness of peer support systems

Conducting and reflecting on this study (chapter 7) has led me to believe that peer support systems are useful when they are effectively implemented and continuously monitored.

Recommendations for future research

More qualitative and explorative studies on peer support are needed. This study can serve as a platform for other researchers to further investigate the experiences of peer supporters in other peer support programmes, topics related to peer support or topics that emerged from the constructive research process. Examples of these topics include exploring the significance of supervision in peer support, the well-being of peer supporters and the training aspects surrounding peer support and how they can be improved.

Conclusion

I believe this research process has been valuable not only to me as the researcher but also to the participants. It has taught me how to be a researcher although, as I mentioned in chapter 7, I do not consider myself an accomplished researcher and I do not believe anyone can consider themselves as such.

The research process gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, thoughts and feelings around peer support. It appears that this exploration was useful to them as it filled the gap of lack of supervision. I believe peer supporters would manage better if the above-mentioned problems are addressed in this school and taken into account when implementing peer support systems in other schools.

In addition, this study may serve as a foundation for future research on peer support, which I encourage, as there is a lack of research in this regard.

I will try
to fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder, widening
scope, but enjoying the freedom that
Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of vision,
that I have perceived nothing completely,
that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk.

A.R. Ammons (in Gergen & Kaye, 1993, p. 259)