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Young People, School Engagement and Perceptions of Support: a mixed methods analysis

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Abstract

As levels of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) remain high in the UK, there is growing concern about processes of school disengagement. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data, we explore some factors that lead young people to disengage from – and potentially re-engage with – schooling. The research employed a sequential design with a quantitative survey of students, followed by two rounds of interviews with a sub-sample of young people. Statistical analysis of our survey confirmed that, for our respondents, school engagement is mediated through perceptions of support. Through longitudinal qualitative data, we consider which sources of support appear to be most important for participants, how changes in perceptions of support affect levels of engagement and how these may change over time.

We aim to contribute to the literature by showing that increasing perceptions of support can positively influence school engagement. Drawing on theories of social capital, we illustrate how complex and dynamic interplays between diffuse actors can provide access to differentiated resources, including economic, social and cultural capital, with varied outcomes for school engagement. We also show how fluid and dynamic processes of engagement and the interplay with support can provide opportunities for promoting positive educational outcomes.

Introduction

Within policy discourses in the UK, there is sustained concern about the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training – so-called NEETs[1] (Mawn et al., 2017). In April-June 2018, 729,000 18-24 year-olds (13%) and 55,000 people aged 16-17 (4%) were NEET (Powell, 2018). In addition to those who have left education, the proportion of young people who are 'persistent absentees' across all state-funded schools in England now stands close to 11% (DfE, 2018).

The concept of 'school engagement' – the extent to which young people are involved, committed and motivated to learn and work towards their academic and professional careers – has been proposed as a tool to assess the likelihood that they will leave education early and without the necessary skills and qualifications to succeed in the labour market (Ferguson *et al*., 2005; Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Rumberger, 2011). This, in turn, can lead to prolonged periods of being NEET, negatively impacting upon these young people's long-term socioeconomic prospects.

Between 2013 and 2018, our mixed-methods study sought to examine how young people's school engagement is mediated through perceptions of support. Within this, we sought to test the hypothesis that school engagement is highly correlated with young people's perception of support from their a) teachers, b) parents and c) friends. Further, we explored whether these relationships differ amongst different socio-demographic groups and the extent to which some sources of support appear to be more important than others. We use longitudinal qualitative interviews to explore how changes in perceptions of support impact upon levels of school engagement and chart how these perceptions change over time and in response to circumstances.

This paper aims to contribute to the literature not only by examining the links between school engagement and perceived support but, furthermore, by showing that changing (i.e. increasing) perceptions of support can positively influence young people's school engagement. Even starting from a low base, positive experiences increase individuals' perceptions of support and can enhance engagement at school over time.

In particular, we argue that perceived support needs to be understood as differentiated, diffuse and dynamic. The rich data derived from our mixed-methods approach reveals *differentiated* types of support, including practical, informational and emotional. Beyond seeking to predict what accounts for variations in engagement at school, we examine the complex interplay between *diffuse* actors, including teachers, parents, other relatives and friends, as sources of perceived support. Using longitudinal qualitative data, we show *dynamic* interactions between perceived support and school engagement over time and how this can provide opportunities for promoting positive educational outcomes.

[1] We recognise that the concept of NEET is controversial (Yates and Payne, 2006) but it was the term used in our project and it is still a key term used in policy discourses. We do not see NEET as a personal characteristic but rather as a dynamic status.

Drawing upon theories of social capital (Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988), our mixed-methods approach goes further than previous research – often highly quantitative in nature – to probe and unpick young people's individual experiences of 'differentiated', 'diffuse' and 'dynamic' support. Beyond seeking to predict what accounts for variations in engagement at school, our framework illustrates the fluid and dynamic process that engagement entails and how its interplay with perceived support may facilitate positive educational outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

School (Dis)Engagement

Theories on 'school dropout' and poor educational outcomes emphasise these are the end result of a gradual process of disengagement from school (Alexander *et al.*, 2001; Rumberger, 1987). Following the seminal work of Fredricks *et al*. (2004), **school (dis)engagement** is now recognised as important in identifying students at risk of experiencing poor school outcomes and difficult school-to-work transitions (Ferguson *et al.*, 2005; Rumberger, 2011), including prolonged periods of being NEET. Hence, as argued elsewhere (D'Angelo & Kaye, 2018), school (dis)engagement is a major indicator, an alarm bell, to identify young people most at-risk of leaving school early or underachieving.

Policy makers and schools intervene primarily to address concerns associated with disengaged students' behaviours: low attendance levels, being disruptive in class and displays of poor motivation. However, Conner and Pope (2013) distinguish between those students who clearly exhibit low engagement, and those who may turn up regularly and show few outward signs of disengagement but who, nonetheless, have little commitment or enthusiasm for school. Thus, it may be more useful to think about disengagement as a multi-dimensional and dynamic process which involves a combination of behavioural, cognitive and affective engagement (Archambault *et al.*, 2009; Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Wang *et al.*, 2011).

School engagement is neither the only, nor necessarily the main predictor of academic achievement. Socio-economic status, in particular, is a major factor in educational outcomes (Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Reay, 2006; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007). While research shows that middle class parents may be good at navigating systems to maximise resources, 'for young people from economically deprived backgrounds, individual resources of ability and ambition do not necessarily translate into educational and occupational success' (Holland *et al.,* 2007: 108-9). Hence, young people from low socioeconomic-status families have access to fewer resources and are more likely to remain NEET over the long term (Butler & Muir, 2017). However, in a systematic review Berkowitz *et al.* (2017) found strong evidence to suggest a correlation between perceived teacher support and student engagement in relation to positive academic outcomes even in situations of socio-economic deprivation.

Of course, engagement should not be seen as an attribute of the student, but rather a set of attitudes and behaviours highly influenced by contextual factors. Characteristics such as a young person's developmental stage, their relationships with parents, teachers and friends, and

institutional settings, all contribute to differences in school engagement (Berkowitz *et al.,* 2017).

Another systematic review (Quin, 2017), highlights the strong association between different sub-dimensions of school engagement and levels of support, particularly teachers' support. For example, after controlling for gender, family background and country-context, 'teacher support' was statistically associated with 'school belonging' (Quin, 2017, p359). More broadly, Quin argues that 'better quality TSRs [Teacher Student Relations] are associated with higher levels of psychological engagement, academic achievement and school attendance and reduced levels of disruptive behaviours, suspensions and dropout' (2017, p373).

Perceptions of Support

As noted in the literature, **perceptions of support**, rather than a quantifiable measure, are interpreted through layers of symbolic meaning and underpinned by particular expectations (Pina & Bengtson, 1993). This points to the salience of an interpretivist framework (Blumer, 1986). In the context of education, it is not simply the availability of support but rather the ways in which young people interpret and respond to support which may shape outcomes (Ginevra *et al*., 2015). We therefore understand perceived social support as 'not solely an act of giving or receiving help' but rather as 'a series of social interactions that generate interpretations and meaning by which [social actors] develop a new understanding of their social reality and identity' (Ng & Sorensen, 2008, p247).

How these interactions enable new understandings and possibilities can be interpreted through the lens of social capital. Social capital comprises the benefits that one derives from participation in social groups and by mobilizing resources available through these groups (Bourdieu 1985). As widely observed in the literature, 'young people's education pathways are today strongly dependent on their ability to draw on the range of resources available to them' (Butler & Muir, 2017, p316). Whilst informed by Bourdieu's concepts of economic, social and cultural capitals, it was not our aim to add to the Bourdieusian literature. Rather, we seek to expand upon the concept of social capital, as developed by Coleman (1988), who suggests that, in educational contexts, social capital comprises the set of social resources that contribute to the cognitive and personal development of a child. For Coleman the value that social capital has for a child's development lies not only within the family (e.g. parental support), but also from networks beyond the familial unit (1988, pS113). The relationship between social capital and academic achievement has been examined by a number of empirical studies, with teacher support and peer networks highlighted as particularly important (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Wentzel, 1998). The different kinds of support available from diffuse actors may evoke particular 'horizons of action' (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Atkins, 2016). Moreover, as Ball *et al*. (2002:55) have noted, these horizons of action are not only material but also perceptual.

Before developing this discussion through our data, we present a brief description of our research methods.

Methods

Data presented in this paper were collected as part of an international, 5-year project funded by the EU[2]. The study aimed to identify factors leading young people to leave education early or without minimum qualifications. The research involved a large survey in schools, across seven countries, and in-depth, follow-up repeat interviews conducted with a sub-sample of young people during and after compulsory schooling.

The research undertaken in the UK, therefore, employed a multimethod sequential design (Brewer & Hunter, 1989), carried out in a number of stages (figure 1). Whilst much is written on the benefits and drawbacks of conducting mixed-methods research (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), the sequential design of our study allowed each methodological approach to be used towards a specific end: the quantitative survey to identify factors related to school engagement; the qualitative stage to elicit specific examples of how perceptions of support impact upon academic outcomes and transitions beyond compulsory schooling. Hence, the research draws on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods whilst mitigating the potential weaknesses of using one approach over the other.

[Figure 1 here]

Students' Survey

The student survey aimed to map some key characteristics, behaviour and perceptions, and to explore interactions between these. In particular, our analysis aimed to develop a multivariate statistical model to identify major factors relating to the level of school engagement of individual students.

Schools and colleges were selected on the basis of being located in areas of relatively high youth unemployment and/or areas with specific demographic or socio-economic challenges. In the UK, the survey was administered in two areas of England - Greater London and the North East (both with regional youth unemployment rates exceeding the national average[3]) – and completed by 3,018 young people from 17 schools and colleges[4]. Participants were spread equally across the two research areas and across the two cohorts selected for inclusion in the project: Year 10 (ages 14-15, the year before GCSE[5]) and Year 12 (or equivalent in colleges of further education) (ages 16-17, the year before A-Levels[6]). The survey data for the UK were analysed using descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations and linear regression techniques. The data and models presented here, drawn from UK data, focus primarily on inter-relationships between students' levels of school engagement (dependent variable) and their perceived support from teachers, parents and friends (independent variables).

The operationalisation of school engagement and perceived support were informed by the literature and previous empirical research. Due to space, a more detailed description of the

[2] Reducing Early School Leaving in the EU (RESL.EU) 2013-18 funding from the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme [grant number SSH-CT-2011-1-320223 RESL.eu].

[3] Unemployment rate for 18-24 year olds: North-East, 24.9%; London, 21.8%; national average, 18.6% (April, 2013).

[4] The schools were quite varied in terms of size, ethnic make-up and Ofsted ratings. Detailed descriptions of the schools have been provided elsewhere (reference removed for anonymous review)

[5] General Certificate of Secondary Education

[6] Advanced Levels

variables derived from the study's questionnaire is provided in the technical appendix. Further variables were included in the analysis to control for gender, ethnicity, cohort, self-reported levels of truancy, academic grades and learning difficulties.

Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative interviews were undertaken with a sub-sample of students from London, who were recruited based on their survey responses. Survey participants consented to participating in follow-up research by providing their contact details[7]. In addition to a range of socio-demographic characteristics, participants were selected because they reported a range of school engagement and perceived support levels (table 1). Following the wider research design and sampling criteria defined for the overall project, a grid was constructed divided into four quadrants: low social support, low school engagement; low support, high engagement; high support, low engagement; and high support, high engagement. From each category four young people were interviewed in 2014/15, of whom 10 continued to follow-up interviews in 2016. The interviews focused on school engagement, educational experiences and outcomes, future aspirations and plans, anticipated challenges and strategies, and sources of support. This paper focuses on the 10 young people who participated in both sets of interviews.

[Table 1 here]

Interviews were fully transcribed and two forms of analysis conducted. First, narrative analysis was used to explore how participants told their individual stories. A second level of thematic coding, using both *a priori* and newly emerging themes, was carried out using NVivo10 software across all transcripts (Ryan and Lorinc, 2018). This combination of analytical frameworks enabled coding within and across transcripts to identify whole narratives as well as themes shared by all participants.

In combining findings from our quantitative and qualitative data, we are not aiming for verification or validity testing, instead we use the rich, longitudinal interview narratives to gain important insights into what lies behind the trends emerging from survey responses.

Findings

Quantitative Findings: 'Hierarchies' of Support

Quantitative analysis of the students' survey data provided general information about the relationship between students' characteristics, attitudes and behaviours and their average levels of school engagement and perceived support from teachers, parents and friends. Pearson product-moment correlation analysis (table 2) confirms that school engagement is highly correlated with social support, as seen in previous studies (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017; Conner & Pope, 2013). In particular, our analysis shows a strong correlation between school engagement

[7] The research was carried out under strict ethical and research governance protocols as required by our university, European Commission and the participating schools, including parental consent. Data protection requirements were strictly followed.

and perceived teacher support (r =.62), a moderately strong relationship with perceived parental support (r =.41) and a lesser, yet still statistically significant correlation between friends' support and engagement (r =.29). Measures of perceived support are, as expected, also significantly correlated with each other.

[Table 2 here]

Further analysis examined whether these relationships differ amongst different socio-demographic groups. As seen in table 3, this revealed only very small gender and cohort differences with regards to levels of school engagement, indicating that average levels of engagement are comparable amongst boys and girls and between pupils in different academic year groups. In terms of ethnicity, our findings appear to show White British students' engagement at school significantly below that of their peers from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups. The aggregation of all BME groups, however, occludes the between-groups differences in terms of school engagement. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) reveals that engagement is, in fact, significantly higher amongst students of Asian background, compared to other groups; if these students are removed from the analysis, no significant differences based on ethnicity are found (see technical appendix).

As mentioned above, class has been identified as an important indicator of being able to maximise resources, to which lower socioeconomic-status families have less access. However, 'class' is a complex and multidimensional social phenomenon, defined variously and operationalised according to such variables as parental education, occupational level or income. The Department for Education's preferred measure of socioeconomic disadvantage focuses on those students who are eligible for free school meals (FSM), intended to assist children from the very poorest backgrounds. However, as shown in table 3, our analysis shows no significant difference in levels of school engagement between 'disadvantaged' students and those not eligible for FSM.

Overall, therefore, very little difference can be detected in terms of school engagement levels across different socio-demographic groups of young people – with the notable exception of Asian students, who appear to be more highly engaged at school (this is consistent with previous findings on the academic achievement of Asian – particularly Indian and Chinese – students, e.g. Wilson *et al.*, 2005).

[Table 3 here]

Further analysis used regression modelling to explore the relative influence that a range of variables had on young people's school engagement (table 4). In particular, we wanted to examine the extent to which some sources of support are more important than others for school engagement.

Model 1 includes socio-demographic characteristics of gender, ethnicity, FSM eligibility and cohort. As expected on the basis of our previous analysis, gender, FSM and cohort were not significant in the model, whilst being of an Asian background is positively associated with higher levels of school engagement. Overall, however, this initial model has a very small explanatory power (Adj. R^2 = 1.4 %).

In model 2, further control variables for student behaviour and attainment are included: levels of truancy, self-reported academic grades and self-reported learning difficulties. Once socio-demographic factors are controlled for, truancy behaviour is significantly correlated with lower levels of engagement, as is whether students reported having learning difficulties. Students reporting higher academic grades were also more likely to report higher levels of school engagement. Overall, this model shows improved, but modest, explanatory power (Adj. R^2 = 12.3 %).

The largest increase in explanatory power is seen by the inclusion of measures of perceived support from teachers, parents and friends in model 3, which greatly increases the power of the model (Adj. R^2 = 47.3%). The relative importance of the control variables is reduced, although most – with the exception of gender, FSM and cohort – remain statistically significant in the model. The effect of perceived teacher support, however, is much stronger than any other variable included in this model (standardized β = .460). Perception of parental support also shows a strong influence on an individuals' school engagement (standardized β = .226).

[Table 4 near here]

Perceived support from friends, whilst significant and positively correlated with engagement, displays a much more modest effect in the model, in comparison to perceived teacher support or parental support. This can be seen as indicative of the ambiguous role that friends' support can play in influencing young people's engagement at school, as discussed in more detail in the qualitative findings.

In order to take this ambiguity into account, a fourth model includes friends' educational aspirations. This variable measures the extent to which young people believe their friends feel it is important to attend class, study hard, get good grades and continue studying beyond secondary education – equating to friends placing greater value on education and focusing more towards academic success. This final step produces a robust model that accounts for almost half of the variance seen in school engagement levels (Adj. R^2 = 48.2%). The inclusion of friends' educational aspirations shows this to be positively correlated with higher levels of school engagement, whilst the relative contribution of perceived friends' support to the model is further reduced.

Reported levels of teacher support remain the most influential factor in this model, with perceived parental support also playing a significant role. The effect of the control variables are further reduced in the final model, although ethnicity, levels of truancy, self-reported grades and learning difficulties remain significant. In particular, truancy behaviour and academic attainment – although both self-reported measures – have a relatively strong influence on predicting school engagement.

By far the largest effect on school engagement is seen once the model takes into account measures of perceived support from teachers, parents and friends. Controlling for demographic characteristics and self-reported school behaviour and academic ability, the importance of perceived teacher support is clear. Feeling supported by teachers and having a strong relationship with them has by far the strongest bearing on young people's engagement in their studies. It should be noted however, that the cross-sectional nature of the survey means that

causality cannot be assumed. It is likely, in fact, that school engagement and perceived support have a bidirectional relationship, with students who are more academically engaged also likely to perceive (if not receive) higher levels of support from their teachers.

Parental support is also an important factor. In line with Coleman's thesis (1988), we also found parents who encourage their child's studies by providing key social support and access to economic, social and cultural capital, creating an environment that values and assists continuing engagement with education (again, with a significant bidirectional effect).

Friends' support, however, is much more ambiguous: the composition of one's friendship groups is of huge importance here and, as young people progress through their adolescent years, the influence friends have on attitudes and behaviours increases exponentially. Students whose friendship groups place greater value on education and are focused more towards academic success are therefore significantly more likely to report being engaged at school, as discussed in the qualitative findings.

Our statistical analysis highlights that school engagement is positively correlated with young people's perceptions of support (although the causal direction of this relationship cannot be ascertained). Furthermore, there appears to be a 'hierarchical' relationship between engagement and different sources of support: perceived teacher support has the strongest relationship, followed by parental support and, to a lesser extent, by friends' support. Indeed, the relationship between friends' support and school engagement is ambiguous and more clearly and strongly (positively) correlated with engagement when examining only friends' educational aspirations. This relationship between school engagement and diffuse sources of support appears to hold across various socio-demographic groups.

However, the way in which this process occurs depends on the young person's circumstances, contexts and opportunity structures. To gain greater insight into this process, we now use in-depth longitudinal interview data to explore how changes in perceptions of support impact upon levels of school engagement and chart how these perceptions change over time and in response to circumstances.

Qualitative Findings

As explained earlier, we selected interview participants based on their survey responses, to gain a more nuanced understanding of perceived support and school engagement. We now structure the findings from the qualitative data around the three key groupings of perceived teacher, parental and friends support, however as highlighted in the concluding discussion, the narratives indicate the important interactions between these diffuse sources of support.

Perceived Teacher Support

Several narratives appear to support our finding from the quantitative analysis that perceived teacher support strongly correlates with school engagement. Ezra, a white British boy, is a case in point. He attended a further education (FE) college and, during the survey, scored low on both measures of support and engagement. At the first interview, he compared his perceptions of teacher support between college and his secondary school: *'[in secondary school] I had no problem at all, I was fine, if I did get stuck, obviously, there was a teacher'*. This enhanced his

achievement: *'my grades were so much better so that's mainly because of the teachers… that helped.'* However, in college he perceived far less support from tutors: *'This year's more… hands off and I have to learn to be more independent in terms of my work and I'm not really good at that.'* He linked this lack of support with his diminishing engagement*: 'I haven't done any coursework whatsoever… I can't motivate myself to finish it.'* By the time of the second interview a year later, Ezra had dropped out of education, without completing his course, and became NEET. Thus, perceptions of support may vary across different educational settings especially for students moving between school and FE college.

Moreover, the availability of actual, formal support may differ from how support is perceived at the individual level. Simon, from white British background, was recruited from the survey because he reported low levels of support but high school engagement as defined through regular attendance. However, he seemed to struggle with schooling, failed his GCSE exams, left school and moved to an FE college to retake English and Maths. Simon's narrative was especially interesting in highlighting the complexity of *'perceived'* support. He acknowledged that there were formal support measures available at his secondary school, nonetheless, he perceived the support available to him personally as 'low'. This suggests that the availability of a raft of support measures is not enough. It is necessary for students to feel they are supported as individuals. By the second interview, Simon had dropped out of college: '*I just want to get out there to start working. I'm tired of education'*. He was looking for work but so far had failed to find anything.

Conducting longitudinal research, we observed that perceptions of support are dynamic and may change retrospectively. This is especially apparent in the case of Darius, a British-born boy of Asian background, who reported low engagement and low support in the survey. However, his interview narratives suggested a more complex picture. At the first interview, Darius presented himself as ambitious and highly motivated. He wanted to study medicine at university and appeared to be working hard towards this goal. He was positive about teachers' support: '*Teachers are happy to help out during their free time when students require it*.' However, by the second interview things had changed. Although passing his A-Level exams, he did not get the grades needed for medicine. He started working for an optician and planned to re-apply to university to study optometry instead of medicine. Remarkably, his assessment of his teachers was now very different: '*The teachers were quite laid back and left it for our means; left the students to their own devices, to actually revise for the exams themselves.'* Darius's narrative suggests how perceptions may be dynamic as well as contingent on factors such as educational outcomes.

Moreover, perceived teacher support was not only dynamic but also diffuse. Several participants' narratives focused on specific, individual teachers as highly supportive and encouraging. For example, Greg singled out one college tutor as especially supportive and influential in building his confidence: '*he's the one I interact with the most, and we have jokes and we laugh and all that, so I mean, he would be close, definitely close'*. Similarly, Flora, discussed in more detail below, also talked at length about the support she received from one particular teacher: *'…mostly my form tutor, he's always giving me advice and help where to go next.'*

Of course teacher support was not described in isolation but, as discussed below, usually formed part of narratives about wider networks of support including parents.

Perceived Parental support

While most participants described their parents as supportive, the narratives revealed interesting variations. Perceived support from families was dynamic, diffuse and gave rise to differentiated resources. Simon, discussed above, described his parents as supportive, but both parents, who had limited formal education, were long-term unemployed. His family seemed unsure how to support Simon's education or advise him on future employment pathways: '*Dunno maybe… I mean I'd have to speak to them. I'll see. I mean, next time I maybe speak to them, I'll see if they've got anything available or something'*.

By contrast, other participants could draw upon significant resources to help navigate school environments. Aisha was identified in the survey with high school engagement and high levels of perceived support. However, her interview narrative suggested a more nuanced picture. Born in Nigeria, she arrived in the UK aged 14 and initially struggled to adjust to secondary school. She got low grades and seemed to be on a trajectory to fail her exams. However, her father used his economic capital to pay for a private tutor and move Aisha to a private school where her grades improved: *'My dad…literally every way…he is really supportive with my school fees and everything'*. Thus, perceived parental support may be enhanced by the availability of economic capital. By the second interview, Aisha had passed her A-Levels and was at university. Similarly, Evie, a white British girl with a disability, perceived her parents, who were highly educated and affluent, as deeply supportive of her education. Her parents drew on their networks to find valuable work-experience for Evie. Without her parents, such an opportunity may have difficult to find due to her disability.

Interview narratives revealed that it was not only parents who were perceived as valuable sources of support. Wider family networks can be important in educational choices and decision-making (Coleman, 1988; Holland et al, 2007; Heath et al, 2017; Butler and Muir, 2017). For example, Mina, from Iraqi background, grew up in Holland, moved to the UK partway through her education and initially was unfamiliar with the UK educational system. Mina described her main source of informational support as her older cousin who graduated from the London School of Economics (LSE). '*I'd definitely ask her opinion… she did politics and law… even my parents always tell me "talk to her because she's been to university in this country, she knows everything."'* Thus, while the survey focused on parental support, the narratives revealed a more diffuse array of actors providing valuable cultural and social capital.

However, it would be misleading to assume that families were always positively perceived. Ezra discussed above, described difficult family relationships. Although living at home with both parents and siblings, Ezra appeared quite isolated from the family and spent a good deal of time alone. He said that he and his father rarely spoke and his mother, who was the main breadwinner, worked long hours and did not have much time to spend with Ezra: '*my mum's too busy*'. Thus, the physical presence of families does not necessarily mean that young people perceive them as supportive. As Coleman observed, the potential social capital available

through parents is irrelevant 'if the parent is not an important part of their children's lives' (1988, p. S110)

Moreover, as noted earlier, young people may draw upon diffuse actors to access different kinds of support. When Kurt was considering to drop out of his college course, he did not talk to his mother but instead turned to friends who fully supported his decision. While his mother was *'shocked'* to discover he was dropping out: '*My friends were like "yes, go for it"… no one thought it was a bad idea.'* Next, we consider the complex role of perceived support from friends.

Perceived Friends' Support

Flora was identified from the survey with low perceived support and low school engagement. However, six months later, at the first interview, we met a highly engaged student with university aspirations, and good levels of perceived support. She explained that at the time of the survey, she had been going through a difficult time. Arriving in the UK from Hungary, Flora experienced difficulty adjusting to a new educational system and making new friends. She described how she had been *'surrounded by the wrong people in terms of friends*'. She explained: '*They just didn't really care about anything. They were just reckless, I guess. They were a bad influence on me'*. Over time, Flora deliberately '*broke the relationship'* with them and made new friends.

The role of friends was also a key factor in Greg's story of school engagement. When Greg, a white British boy, was 8 years old his parents separated and his mother moved to Spain, with Greg and his brothers, to join the grandparents who had already retired there. Thus, Greg had the majority of his schooling in Spain. However, he got in with the 'wrong' crowd, got distracted, did not study and fell behind in his work: *'I just let people influence me too much, I think, and then I just didn't want to do education anymore, because I didn't see the benefits'*. Eventually he left school with no qualifications. However, the family's return to England gave Greg the chance to make a fresh start in his education. He realised that without qualifications he would end up in a dead-end job. He returned to education and by the second interview had progressed to a level 3 ICT course. Greg's narrative suggests how school disengagement need not be permanent but, under the right conditions, young people can re-engage.

The narratives of Greg and Flora reveal how friends may have a negative impact on school engagement. Friends' support is dynamic and diffuse and can work in ways that both encourage and undermine school engagement. This may partly explain why our survey analysis did not find strong correlation between perceived friends' support and school engagement. However, as suggested in Flora's story, young people do not simply follow the influence of friends.

Michael, British-born from an African background, reported high perceived support, especially from his school friends, many also from African households. These friends were highly engaged in education: '*they always say that "I'm going to work hard and… I'm going to go to a good university, get a good job, and get a lot of money out of it."*' However, despite this perceived encouragement for school engagement, Michael had low school engagement and eventually got low grades in just two A-levels. By the second interview he was working in a shop while doing a part time music production course. Thus, we should be wary of simply

assuming that young people are necessarily influenced by the school engagement of their friends.

Discussion: ***Diffuse, Dynamic and Differentiated Support***

The role of social support and resources in combatting school 'drop out' has long been recognised (Coleman, 1988). In this paper, using mixed, longitudinal research design, we contribute to that body of work by exploring some of the factors and processes that lead to young people's (dis)engagement from school. Our analysis of empirical data collected through a large survey confirms the strong and significant correlation between perceived levels of support and overall levels of school engagement reported by young people in secondary schools and colleges. However, this broad trend, which emerges when looking at composite indices of engagement and support, hides the sheer level of complexity and variability. To unpack this, it is necessary, firstly, to disaggregate the statistical data and explore the relationships between different types of support, and between these and other individual and contextual variables. Secondly, it is important to bring into conversation the survey data and the more nuanced, personal experiences emerging from the in-depth, repeat interviews with individual young people. In so doing, we show how perceived support can be understood as diffuse, differentiated and dynamic.

Our statistical analysis indicates a clear 'hierarchy' with regard to the role played by diffuse sources of support in relation to overall levels of school engagement. The perceived level of teacher support is the strongest predictor of engagement and, as shown in interviews, the one that operates most straightforwardly. Nonetheless, while survey results show aggregate levels of teacher support, in interviews, young people usually refer to one or two particular teachers who are regarded as especially supportive and influential.

Parental support also displays a strong correlation with engagement, though weaker than teacher support. There is abundant evidence that 'family support plays a crucial and central role in young people's educational outcomes within today's uncertain economic landscape' (Butler & Muir, 2017, p326). Amongst our interviewees, parents were usually regarded as supportive of schooling and educational achievement. As noted in international research, parents' influence on future aspirations may be mediated by their children's perceptions of parental support: 'the more adolescents feel supported, the more they consider themselves able to cope with the tasks of identifying goals, seeking out information and making choices' (Ginevra *et al.,* 2015, p12). However, we also found some tensions and breakdowns within families which left some young people feeling unsupported. Our data also show that families are not single units, and in line with Coleman (1988) we also found that diffuse relatives, including cousins, for example, may provide access to different kinds of practical and informational support.

When looking at perceived support from friends, our data indicate a correlation with engagement which is statistically significant, but much weaker than teacher and parental support, and particularly weak when all factors are brought together into a multiple regression model. As noted elsewhere in the literature (Holt *et al.,* 2013), friends' support is multi-dimensional and can influence levels of school engagement and educational aspirations

negatively as well as positively. The narratives of young people presented in this paper clearly illustrate the complex relationship between their friendship groups and attitudes towards schooling.

Our survey allows us to look at reported levels of perceived support and engagement only as a snapshot. However, repeated interviews generated longitudinal data, demonstrating how perceptions of support and levels of engagement with school can dramatically change over time. Our research found examples of gradual disengagement from education leading to school dropout as described elsewhere in the literature (Ferguson *et al.*, 2005; Fredricks *et al*., 2004; Rumberger, 1987, 2011). Changing circumstances associated with family breakdown, geographical mobility and relocation to a new environment can all impact on young people's perceived support, levels of engagement and outcomes.

It should be acknowledged however, that perceived support is not an objective measure of level/number of support structures/interventions in place (Pina & Bengtson, 1993). What is important is that a young person feels personally supported. Our participants narrated differentiated forms of support, from diffuse actors, which seemed to influence educational engagement in varied ways. Young people highlighted informational support, usually from teachers; as well as emotional support, such as encouragement from parents, friends and teachers. Moreover, the young people referred to differentiated resources including financial support (economic capital) and valuable knowledge (cultural capital) (Butler & Muir, 2017; Holland *et al*., 2007; Holt *et al*., 2013) from diffuse actors.

Clearly, schools need to be understood as part of wider eco-systems (Bronfrenbenner, 2005). Young people are actors within specific socio-economic and policy contexts. Their school engagement is shaped by perceived support; however, other factors - such as family economic, cultural and social capital - are a key backdrop to their life chances (Coleman, 1988, Reay, 2006; Holland et al., 2007; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007). While our research focused on how school engagement is correlated with perceptions of support, clearly, these processes need to be understood within wider structural contexts. In particular, future investigations are needed to explore the complex ways in which socio-economic and class background interact with young people's school engagement and their perceptions of support from teachers, parents and friends, as well as the relationship between these constructs. These aspects could not be fully explored through our dataset which, as explained earlier, had only limited information on social class. Our study, however, has important theoretical and practical implications through advancing understanding of the differentiated perceptual and dynamic processes impacting on school engagement. These findings can help schools, teachers and parents in developing more effective support mechanisms to increase students' school engagement and potentially lead to improved academic and occupational outcomes.

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Figure 1: Sequential multimethod research design in the UK

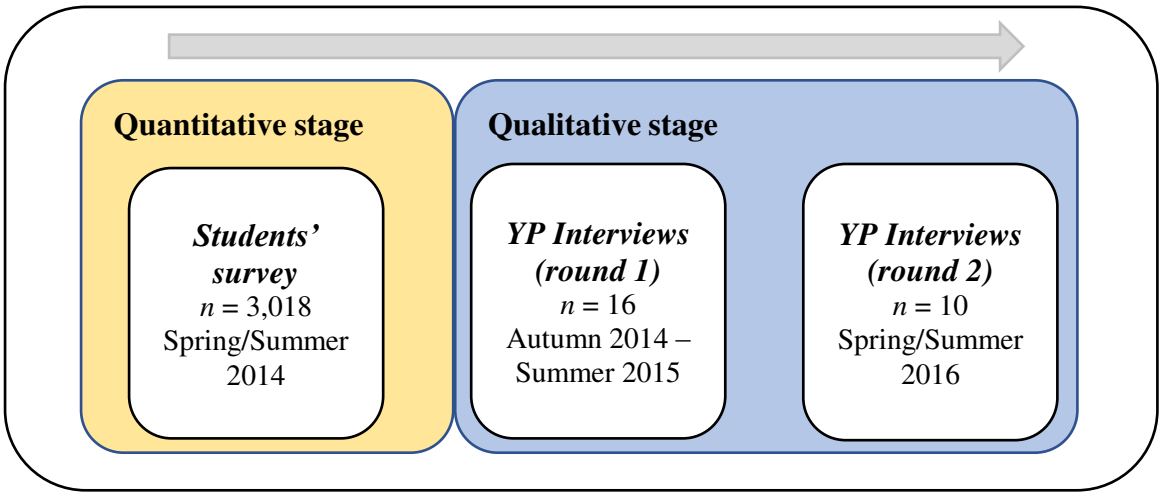

Table 1. Interview Participants' Background Characteristics[1]

Name[2]	Year of birth	Gen Der[3]	Ethnicity	Countr y of Birth	Age of arrival in the UK	Father's highest qualification	Mother's highest qualification	Quad Rant[4]
Aisha	1996	F	Black African	Nigeria	15	Degree	Degree	HH
Darius	1996	M	Asian	UK	N/A	GCSE/ O level	A level or equivalent	LL
Evie	-	F	White British	UK	N/A	Vocational	Unknow	HL
Ezra	1997	M	White British	UK	N/A	-	-	LL
Flora	1997	F	White Other	Hungary	13	Other/ Foreign qualification	Degree	LL
Greg	1997	M	White British	UK	15- moved to Spain at 8	No qualifications	No qualifications	LH
Kurt	1994	M	White British	UK	N/A	Vocational	GCSE/ O levels	LL
Michael	1997	M	Black African	UK	N/A	Unknow	Unknow	HL
Mina	1997	F	Arab	Nether- lands	11	Degree	Other/ Foreign qualification	HH
Simon	1994	M	White British	UK	N/A	No qualifications	No qualifications	LH

Notes: [1] Self-reported values from survey

[2]Pseudonyms

[3]F – female, M – male

[4]Social support/ school engagement; H - high, L - low

Table 2: Correlation between school engagement and perceived support

	School Engagement	Teacher Support	Parental Support	Friends' Support
School Engagement	1	.623**	.414**	.289**
Teacher Support		1	.359**	.302**
Parental Support			1	.227**
Friends' Support				1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 3: Sample characteristics and school engagement levels

			School Engagement		
		N (%)	*Mean ± SD*	*t*	*p*
Gender				-.70	.48
	Male	1,247 (42.5%)	3.71 ± .51		
	Female	1,684 (57.5%)	3.72 ± .51		
Cohort				-.22	.03
	Cohort 1	1,545 (52.9%)	3.70 ± .53		
	Cohort 2	1,378 (47.1%)	3.74 ± .48		
Ethnicity				-.38	< .01
	White British	1,495 (50.9%)	3.69 ± .51		
	BME	1,444 (49.1%)	3.76 ± .51		
FSM eligibility				1.28	.20
	not FSM	2,109 (84.0%)	3.71 ± .51		
	FSM	401 (16.0%)	3.68 ± .51		
All students		**2,939 (100%)**	**3.72 ± .51**		

Table 4: Four-step multiple regression analysis of school engagement

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Std. β	***p***	***Std. β***	***p***	***Std. β***	***p***	***Std. β***	***p***
Gender (=Female)	.014	.551	-.008	.786	-.015	.415	-.019	.292
Ethnicity (=Asian)	.122	<.001	.099	<.001	.066	<.001	.058	.001
FSM (=eligible)	-.027	.250	.021	.347	.035	.057	.032	.071
Cohort (=cohort 2)	-.023	.602	-.028	.228	-.032	.082	-.029	.105
Level of truancy			-.213	<.001	-.116	<.001	-.109	<.001
Academic grades			.218	<.001	.123	<.001	.122	<.001
Learning difficulties (=yes)			-.086	<.001	-.063	<.001	-.058	.001
Perceived teacher support					.460	<.001	.443	<.001
Perceived parental support					.226	<.001	.126	<.001
Perceived friends' support					.074	<.001	.050	.010
Friends' educational aspirations							.107	<.001
Adjusted R^2	***.014***		***.123***		***.473***		***.482***	

* Dependent Variable: School Engagement