

FAMILY SUPPORT AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

**The Relationship Between Family Support and School Engagement Among Black  
Adolescents**

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### **Abstract**

Adolescents who have relatively higher levels of family support show higher school engagement on average, but some adolescents may diverge from this average pattern and be highly engaged in school despite not having supportive family relationships. This study examined the possibility that subsets of adolescents show high school engagement yet low family support and vice versa, contrasting the average positive association. We used crosstabulation analysis on data from the National Survey of American Life- Adolescent Supplement (N=1170), a survey of Black adolescents ages 13-17. As expected, on average, school engagement was positively correlated with family instrumental and emotional support. However, our findings also reveal noteworthy exceptions: about 12-16% of adolescents were highly engaged in school despite low family support, or reported disengagement from school despite receiving a high levels of family support. Additional factors such as school resources, teacher and peer support, self-motivation and systemic barriers may help explain these variations. These findings suggest that family support and school engagement are not closely tied for approximately 12-16% of the Black adolescent population in the US; future research should investigate reasons why and the generalizability of our findings across other cultural contexts.

*Keywords:* school engagement, family support, adolescent

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## **The Relationship Between Family Support and School Engagement Among Black Adolescents**

Black students account for 15% of the total high school student population in the United States, but disproportionately experience systemic barriers in education, including overrepresentation in suspensions, expulsions, restraint, seclusion, and referrals to law enforcement and arrests, as well as underrepresentation in advanced placement courses and dual enrollment programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), the graduation rate for Black students in U.S. public high schools was 81%, which is lower than the average high school graduation rate of 87%. Studies show that school engagement is a key determination of school success. Research has found that school engagement has a positive correlation with educational achievement (Skinner et al., 1990) and can predict academic success among Black adolescents (Sirin & Rogers Sirin, 2005).

School engagement is a multidimensional construct consisting of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in school (Frederick et al., 2004). Students' engagement in school can act as a protective factor against school dropout (Fredricks et al., 2004) and can influence their educational outcomes. Disengagement from school can lead to psychological and behavioral problems in adolescents, putting them at higher risk for alcohol and drug use, mental health problems, and criminal involvement, compared to engaged students. (Steinberg, 1996). Furthermore, adolescent disengagement from school can lead to school dropout, increased criminal involvement, and long-term risks such as limited job opportunities, lower socioeconomic and health conditions (National Research Council, 2004). When there are problems with students being disengaged from school, especially during high school, school engagement can play a key role as a buffer to minimize or even prevent these problems.

The general consensus among researchers is that school engagement is crucial not only for students themselves, but also for related stakeholders, including families, schools and other educators (Frederick, 2011). From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, social environments may influence students' school engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Research has shown that family support can facilitate school engagement and students' sense of belonging at school, which, in turn, can impact academic outcomes (Roksa & Kinsley, 2018). Family support, both emotional and instrumental, plays a key role in adolescents' welfare and development as they go about their daily lives. Emotional support refers to comfort and care received from family members, while instrumental support refers to tangible support such as financial assistance and transportation provided by family members. Research suggests that adolescents who receive strong family support improve their mental and physical well-being, which in turn contribute to their school engagement (Cross et al., 2018).

While high family support is generally linked with higher school engagement, are there exceptions to this trend? For instance, why do some adolescents remain highly engaged in school despite receiving little emotional and instrumental support from their families? And why do some adolescents show low school engagement even when they receive high family support? These questions indicate that school engagement may be influenced by multiple factors beyond family support. Could different types of social support have different impacts on adolescents' school engagement? For example, teacher support has been found to have a stronger influence on adolescents' sense of connection to school, their valuing of learning, and their compliance with school rules (Fall & Roberts, 2012). Peer support has a greater impact on behavioral engagement, such as participation in extracurricular activities, while family support remains crucial across all aspects of engagement throughout the school years (Wang & Eccles, 2012).

Additionally, school environment and adolescents' personal attributes may also influence Black adolescents' academic outcomes (Fredricks et al. 2004; Dupree et al., 2015).

The Eco-Interactional Developmental (EID) Model can help explain how the social environment interacts with students' school engagement, and can help to understand the dynamics of exceptional cases. These environments include family, school and neighborhoods. The model emphasizes that positive social support can facilitate school success (Bowen et al., 2008). Additionally, the EID model highlights that proximal processes may change over time and vary among individuals. This variability explains why some people succeed in disadvantaged environments while others struggle despite receiving support.

These findings illustrate the general relationship between family support and school engagement among students in American public schools, showing that family support improves school engagement. However, this relationship does not always apply to all populations. Although studies have explored the link between family support and school engagement among Black adolescents, few studies have examined exceptional cases where family support and school engagement may not follow this general pattern. This limitation leaves open the task of understanding these exceptional instances – a task that can lead to making tailored interventions to address unique challenges that Black adolescents may face.

The current study draws on data from the National Survey of American Life- Adolescent Supplement and addresses two research questions. The first research question is: How is family support related to school engagement among Black adolescents? The second research question is: Are there cases where Black adolescents show high school engagement despite low family support or low engagement despite high family support? The following is a brief summary of the

theoretical framework for the study as well as an overview of research on school engagement during adolescence.

### **Theoretical Framework: The Eco-Interactional Developmental Model**

The Eco-Interactional Developmental (EID) model was applied to explore the relationship between family support and school engagement, as well as the exceptional instances that do not follow the expected trends for this relationship. The EID model was proposed by Richman and Bowen (2004), and is rooted in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development. This model is used to understand the dynamics of social environment and students' school success, emphasizing that positive social support can facilitate school success (Bowen et al., 2008).

The EID model looks at school success through the lens of school engagement, which includes both physical and psychological engagement aspects. In this framework, school success involves students physically attending school, participating in school activities, completing homework, avoiding behavioral problems, achieving good academic performance, and maintaining a positive attitude toward school (Bowen, 2009). This definition overlaps with the concept of school engagement, but school success is considered a broader construct that also includes test scores and long-term academic outcomes.

The EID model of school success emphasizes the dynamics of mutual influence between students and social environments throughout their development. These environments include family, school and neighborhood. They are intertwined and influenced by broader structures such as societal values and resources (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Students tend to achieve better outcomes when these environments have supportive relationships within themselves and strong connection with each other (Bowen, 2009).

Two important concepts in this model are “goodness of fit” and “proximal processes”. Goodness of fit refers to how the environment supports individuals’ needs and how well individuals are equipped to face the challenges or demands in their life. Two types of fits are introduced. One is needs-supplies, which focuses on how the environment provides resources, opportunities, and support to meet individuals’ basic needs, such as safety and emotional support for children. Another type of fit is demands-competencies, which focus on how individuals’ personal abilities, skills and competencies align with the demands of the environment. For example, children or youth may be psychologically overwhelmed when environmental demands exceed their abilities, while appropriate demands facilitate better school success, mental well-being, and resilience (Richman & Bowen, 2004). Lower fit for both kinds of fit can lead to struggles with adaptation, and result better engagement (resilience) or withdrawal (Bowen, 2009).

Proximal processes refer to daily, repeated interactions between individuals and their environment, such as with family and school. According to the EID model, proximal processes are used to explain the interaction between people and their social environment and its influence on individuals’ fit and success. Proximal processes can both facilitate and hinder personal development and they influence individuals “goodness of fit” with their environment. Positive interactions promote better outcomes and protect against challenges, while negative interactions may lead to withdraw. The EID model emphasizes that proximal processes may change over time and vary among individuals. This variability explains why some people succeed in disadvantaged environments while others struggle with support. Using this EID theoretical framework, we can now turn to explaining the main topics of the proposed study, beginning with school engagement during adolescence.

### **School Engagement During Adolescence**

Previous studies divide school engagement into three engagement types: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Fredericks et al. (2004) described behavioral engagement as including adhering to school rules, preventing disruptive behaviors, involvement in academic learning, and participating in school activities. They state that emotional engagement consists of students' attitudes toward school, teachers, classroom context, and sense of belonging to school. Cognitive engagement involves psychological effort and the use of strategies during learning (Frederick, 2011). Connell et al. (1995) add that engagement is multidimensional and consists of students' behavioral engagement such as effort and interest in carrying out tasks and overall psychological involvement in the task. Skinner et al. (1990) described engagement as encompassing both action and emotion related to schoolwork. Fin and Rock (1997) further classified behavioral engagement into three levels: basic compliance with school rules, initiative in schoolwork, and participation in school activities. Most studies examine one or two components of these dimensions (Stipek, 2002; Perry et al., 2010). However, the items measuring school engagement in the dataset I use include all three components, aligning with Frederick's definition of school engagement as a multidimensional construct including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Frederick et al., 2004).

Generally, school engagement predicts academic performance. High engagement contributes to high educational achievement and vice versa (Skinner et al., 1990). School engagement can also reduce adolescents' risk behaviors (Connell et al., 1995). It can act as a protective factor against school dropout (Fredricks et al., 2004). School dropout is linked to future disadvantages such as lower socioeconomic status, higher health problems, mortality rates, and criminal involvement (Richman et al., 2004). In addition, children's emotional engagement

in early school years can influence their later school achievement, which has a lasting impact on their future educational journey (Armstrong et al., 2022). Disengagement from school not only brings a burden to society, but also impacts adolescents' competency in society (Bowen, 2009). Steinberg (1996) also states that when students disengage from school, they are more likely to be absent from class, not finish schoolwork and exhibit problem behaviors.

### **Family Support and School Engagement**

Research on family support includes two distinct definitions. One definition is assistance that a family as a whole receives from external resources. In keeping with this definition, one study defines family support more specifically as interventions or services provided by professionals to improve child and family well-being. This type of family support includes formal (professional service, state) and informal support (community, social network), which may involve emotional, informational, professional, financial, and childcare support (Devaney et al., 2021). Similarly, another study states that family support consists of help that parents or caregivers receive from members of formal and informal social networks, allowing them the time and energy to raise children (Dunst, 2023). Another study describes sources and types of support, and support often comes from family members, friends and professionals. They define four types of family support, emotional, physical, instrumental and informational support, but continue to focus on external resources provided to the family (Kyzar et al., 2012).

The other definition of family support refers to help that individuals receive from their family members. Cross (2023) examined family support through instrumental and emotional support that adolescents receive from family members. Emotional support refers to comfort and care from someone who makes the receiver feel that this person is on their side (Richman et al., 1998). Emotional support can be assessed by how adolescents feel loved, cared for, and listened

to by their families. Instrumental support refers to tangible help from family members (Cross et al., 2018).

Studies have examined family support through the lenses of emotional and instrumental support. Family emotional support improves students' mental well-being and facilitates school engagement, which is crucial for academic performance (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). Similarly, another study suggests that parental emotional support positively correlates with self-esteem, which in turn influences adolescents' happiness (Lim et al., 2015). Emotional and instrumental support from family can buffer stress and reduce the risk of substance use among adolescents (Wills et al., 2019). Wills et al. (1992) explored adolescent substance use and family support, emphasizing that emotional and instrumental support from parents can help adolescents address stress. Roksa and Kinsley (2019) found that family emotional support was linked with greater school engagement, whereas financial support showed no significant association with outcome in low-income families. Cross et al. (2018) also stated that emotional and instrumental support were the most frequently reported helpful types of family support in adolescents.

Family support affects adolescents' engagement in school, academic outcomes and overall well-being. When parents are involved in their children's schooling, children develop more positive attitudes to school and perform better academically, regardless of their parents' socioeconomic and educational level (Bornstein, 2002). A study examined adolescents' social support and life satisfaction across forty-two countries and found that family support has the strongest positive correlation with adolescents' life satisfaction (Bi et al., 2021). Another study states that family support plays an important role throughout the lives of children and adolescents (Rueger et al., 2016). Family support can predict school engagement. For example, one study examined parental, teacher, and peer support in students' school engagement from middle school

to high school and found that family support continues to play a crucial role in adolescents' school engagement over time. The study suggests that when adolescents receive more parental support, they are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities, feel connected to school and value learning (Wang & Eccles, 2012).

Through historical and present inequities, Black families and youth in the US have been impacted by adverse contexts such as systemic racism throughout their lifetimes. Furthermore, compared to their white peers, Black children and adolescents are disproportionately affected by suspension and expulsion (Owens and McLanahan 2020; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2023), as well as academic challenges such as grade repetition and low grades. These educational disparities lead to a cycle of disadvantage, negatively impacting later academic achievement, social status, and economic conditions (Cross, 2023).

Research emphasizes the crucial role of school engagement in academic achievement, including among African Americans. Sirin & Rogers Sirin (2005) examined African American adolescents' school engagement and found that school engagement predicts academic success, showing that students who were more engaged in school tend to perform better academically, regardless of their background and personal abilities. Similarly, Connell et al. (1994) suggest that improving students' engagement is one of the most effective ways to boost academic performance among African American students from low-income families. Notably, they highlight that family plays an important role in interventions aimed at enhancing students' educational success.

Throughout history, Black families have developed navigation strategies to cope with systemic challenges. These strategies include parental support, extended social networks, and identity development, all of which contribute to their resilience in life (Stern et al., 2024). For

example, Black families apply a parenting style of using firm rules and caring support. Mothers provide strong emotional support and create safe spaces that allow children and youth to express their emotions. Additionally, they teach children how to manage negative emotions to protect them from the misinterpretations of their emotional expressions that might be considered threatening (Dunbar et al., 2022).

Besides their immediate household, Black families are often connected with extended family networks, which play important roles in providing support. These extended family members have gathered resources and supported each other throughout their lives, especially when their access to formal resources was limited (Stewart, 2007). One study further suggests that Black families have a long history of reciprocal support. For example, parents provide their adult children with financial and emotional support, and in turn, these children take care of their aging family members (Daly et al., 1995).

Regardless of income level, instrumental support plays important role in Black family dynamics, encompassing financial assistance, transportation, help with chores, and assistance during illness (Taylor et al., 2022). Black adolescents often engage in reciprocal support with family members, and rank financial support as the most useful, with emotional and practical support following in second and third place respectively. In return, adolescents provide emotional and practical support to their family members (Cross et al., 2018).

Finally, collective coping strategies play an important role in Black families' as they face challenges. Collective coping involves solving problems by collaborating with family and friends. These strategies emphasize the importance of social support in navigating challenges (Utsey et al., 2007).

### **Factors Influencing Adolescent School Engagement**

Research suggests that family support facilitates school engagement; however, other factors may also influence school engagement. According to the EID model, students' school success is influenced by proximal processes, such as interactions with family, school and neighborhood, as well as intra-personal attributes like motivation and self-esteem. Students tend to achieve better outcomes when these environments provide supportive relationships within and strong connections with each other (Bowen, 2009).

Adolescence is a period of physical and psychological transition from childhood to adulthood, and studies suggest that it is a time when individuals encounter more stressful events, perceive these events as stressful, and are more likely to engage in risky behaviors compared to childhood and adulthood (Spear, 2000; Steinberg, 2007). However, adolescents can be resilient when facing typical difficulties of their age, particularly when they have support from caring adults (Steinberg, 2001).

Research suggests that teachers' support plays an important role in adolescent school engagement. A supportive teacher-student relationship can enhance students' willingness to follow school rules, strengthen their feeling of belonging at school, and increase the value they place on learning (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Similarly, another study found that a warm, trusting, and close relationship with teachers facilitates students' school engagement (Murray, 2009).

Peer support is also a crucial form of social support for adolescents' school engagement. One study suggests that positive peer relationships contribute to students' behavioral and emotional engagement at school (Garcia-Reid, 2007). On the other hand, peer rejection increases the likelihood of students disengaging from school (French & Conrad, 2001). Social support from different sources does not impact adolescent school engagement equally (Wang & Eccles,

2012), a positive support from all these social supports may contribute to better school engagement. Furthermore, identity development and resilience also influence Black adolescents' academic outcomes (Dupree et al., 2015).

### **The Current Study**

This study aims to understand the relationship between family support and school engagement among Black adolescents and explore whether there are exceptional instances other than the general pattern.

The specific research questions for this study are: (1) How is family support related to school engagement among Black adolescents? (2) Are there cases where Black adolescents show high school engagement despite low family support or low engagement despite high family support? We examined both instrumental and emotional support. Addressing these questions can shed light on how best to design interventions to help when there are problems with school engagement or family support. There are two hypotheses:

1. Both instrumental and emotional support are positively associated with school engagement. Adolescents who receive higher levels of family support are more likely to show higher levels of school engagement, while those with lower levels of family support will have lower school engagement.
2. There are unique cases where higher family support is associated with lower school engagement, and lower family support is associated with higher school engagement.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The data comes from the National Survey of American Life-Adolescent Supplement (NSAL-A). The sample consisted of 1170 adolescents, with 51.9% identifying as female and

48.1% as male. Participants included African American (N=810) and Black Caribbean (N=360) adolescents. The mean age was 15.03 (SD=1.425), with a range from 13 to 17 years.

### **Procedure**

The NSAL-A sample is used to study Black adolescents' mental health and well-being in the United States. These data were collected from 2001 to 2004 by a research program at the University of Michigan as a supplement to the National Survey of American Life (NSAL), a comprehensive study of mental health and disorders among Black people. The NSAL-A is a cross-sectional survey that includes data from 1170 adolescents aged 13 to 17 years old (Cross, 2023). Adolescent participants were randomly selected from households identified as African American or Black Caribbean. When a household had multiple adolescents, two participants of different genders were selected whenever possible (Seaton et al., 2008). Most interviews were conducted face-to-face in adolescents' homes using computers, while 18% of the interviews were conducted via phone (Cross et al., 2018).

### **Measures**

**Emotional support.** Emotional support was examined with three questions: a) How often do your family members make you feel loved and cared for? b) How often do your family members listen to you talk about your private problems and concerns? c) How often do your family members express interest and concern for your well-being? The responses were measured by using a four-point Likert scale: very often, fairly often, not too often, and never, assigned values from 1 to 4, respectively. The items were reverse-coded before creating the composite scores, with higher scores indicating greater levels of support.

**Instrumental support.** Instrumental support variable was assessed with two items: a) How often do your family members provide you with transportation? and b) How often do your

family members help you financially? The responses were measured by using a four-point Likert scale: very often, fairly often, not too often, and never, assigned values from 1 to 4, respectively. The items were reverse-coded before creating the composite scores, with higher scores indicating greater levels of support.

**School engagement.** School engagement was assessed using a nine-item scale.

Participants were asked how true each of the following statements were when they were in school: “Most of my teachers treat(ed) me fairly,” “I (care/cared) a lot about what my teachers (think/thought) of me,” “I (like/liked) school,” “I (care/cared) a lot about what my teachers (think/thought) of me,” “Getting good grades (is/was) important to me,” “Homework (is/was) a waste of time,” “I (like/liked) my teachers,” “I (try/tried) hard at school,” “I (feel/felt) as if I (don't/didn't) belong at school,” “Most of the things I learn(ed) in school are unimportant.” The response format used a 4-point Likert-type scale, with “very” coded as 1, “somewhat” as 2, “not very” as 3, and “not at all” as 4. The items were reverse-coded before creating the composite scores, with higher scores indicating higher levels of school engagement.

**Demographic characteristics.** These include age, gender, ancestry or national origins and income. Age was measured with the question: “How old are you now?” Gender was measured by asking to select from 1 Male and 2 Female. Ancestry or national origins was measured with the question: “Are you Black, Caribbean or another race?” and the participants were asked to choose from three options: 1. Black, 2. Caribbean and 3. Other (SPECIFY). Income was measured with a question: “Would you mind giving the letter from page 46 in your booklet, which comes closest to the total income you had in 2000 (2001 IF INTERVIEWED IN 2002) before taxes?”

**Plan of Analysis**

As a preliminary analysis, I will conduct descriptive analyses for all variables to generally understand the data for instrumental and emotional support, as well as school engagement. For the first research question, I will use bivariate Spearman correlation to analyze the relationship between family support and school engagement. Specifically, I will conduct two correlation analyses: 1) between emotional support and school engagement, and 2) between instrumental support and school engagement. I will use Spearman's rho because it does not require normality and is less sensitive to outliers, allowing for further correlation analyses. Additionally, the sample size is large, and the distributions of the three variables deviate from normality.

To address the second research question, to examine how many adolescents had high support but low engagement or vice versa, I will conduct a crosstabulation analysis. First, I will perform a descriptive analysis, using the top 25% and bottom 25% thresholds to categorize emotional support, instrumental support and school engagement. Second, I will create new variables to classify the highest and lowest scores for each variable. Finally, I will generate a crosstabulation to examine different combinations, including: 1) high emotional support and low school engagement, 2) low emotional support and high school engagement, 3) high instrumental support and low school engagement, and 4) low instrumental support and high school engagement.

The items used for the measures were reverse-coded and combined into composite scores. The Cronbach's alpha for emotional support is 0.634, for instrumental support is 0.617, and for school engagement is 0.71, indicating a moderate internal consistency of the items.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for emotional support, instrumental support, and school engagement. The means of the three variables are close to their medians and are higher than the midpoint. These moderately high mean scores indicate that most participants likely received high levels of support and demonstrated high school engagement. The histograms also show left skewness, with most values clustered toward the higher end, suggesting some deviations from a perfect normal distribution (Figures 1, 2 and 3). Z-scores, p-p plot and the scatterplot (Figures 4 and 5) detected a few outliers, which are acceptable given the large sample size. Based on the information above, the assumption of normality is not met, but the assumptions of outliers and linearity are satisfied.

### Correlations

Emotional support from family was positively and significantly correlated with school engagement ( $r = 0.308$ ,  $p < .001$ , CI [0.253, 0.36]), representing a medium effect size. Instrumental support from family was also positively and significantly correlated with school engagement ( $r = 0.203$ ,  $p < .001$ , CI [0.146, 0.259]), representing a small effect size.

### Cross-tabulation Analyses

The analysis of the top and bottom scores of emotional support, instrumental support and school engagement was conducted using the 25th and 75th percentile thresholds (Table 4). The 25<sup>th</sup> percentile scores for emotional support, instrumental support, and school engagement were 3, 3, and 3.11, respectively. The 75<sup>th</sup> percentile scores for emotional support, instrumental support, and school engagement were 4, 4, and 3.67, respectively.

The cross-tabulation analysis showed that 81 cases had high instrumental support but low school engagement, accounting for 12.2% of the instrumental support group. Additionally, 62 cases had low instrumental support but high school engagement, making up 16.3% of the group. There were 44 cases with high emotional support but low school engagement, accounting for 12.1%, and 52 cases with low emotional support but high school engagement, making up 13.5% of the group.

Table 4 also shows that when instrumental support was high, 163 cases also had high school engagement, representing 28.5% of the instrumental support group. When instrumental support was low, 110 cases also had low school engagement, making up 28.9% of the instrumental support group. Similarly, when emotional support was high, 129 participants also had high school engagement, accounting for 35.5% of the emotional support group. When emotional support was low, 132 participants also had low school engagement, representing 34.2% of this group.

Overall, Table 4 indicates that more participants had high school engagement when they received high emotional and instrumental support, and more participants had low school engagement when they received low support. In contrast, fewer participants showed high school engagement despite low support or low school engagement despite high support. However, understanding these contrasting cases is important for gaining insights to improve school engagement and develop effective interventions.

### **Discussion**

This study examines whether emotional support and instrumental support from family are related to school engagement among Black adolescents, and also explores unique cases in which high family support corresponds with low school engagement and vice versa. The findings

supported my hypotheses and indicate a positive correlation between both types of support and school engagement. However, as expected, some exceptional cases deviate from this pattern. Specifically, some adolescents exhibit high school engagement despite receiving little family support, while some others show low school engagement when receiving strong family support. These results suggest that some adolescents who do not receive much support from their family are still thriving in school, perhaps because they receive additional support from school, teachers, or peers (Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009), or because they are highly self-reliant (Clark 1983).

### **The Positive Association Between Family Support and School Engagement**

Family support is positively correlated with Black adolescents' school engagement. Black adolescents who receive stronger family support, tend to have higher school engagement outcomes, and when they lack family support, their school engagement decreases. This result is consistent with previous research showing that close relationships with family can facilitate adolescents' school success and school behavior (Wang & Eccles, 2012; Marks, 2000; Sanders, 1998), which could be because family support contributes to emotion stability, self-efficacy and shared values that help adolescents maintain motivation and a strong connection to school (Kyere et al. 2020). Cross (2023) suggests that individual's strong connection with their family contributes to family support, positive behavior, and shared values. When adolescents have a supportive family environment, they tend to behave better and achieve success at school. The closeness and supportive family contribute to adolescents' emotional stability, sense of competence, and overall development (Rose et al., 2014). Students who receive strong support and guidance from their parents are better able to navigate challenges at school and succeed academically (Clark, 1983). In particular, regular communication between parents and their children provides emotional support, which in turn enhances students' academic performance.

In contrast, low levels of family support may hinder adolescents' ability to cope with challenges at school. For example, negative relationships with family members are linked to lower grades, grade repetition and suspension (Cross, 2023). An unstable family environment such as conflict (Bengtson et al., 2002), can reduce supportive relationships within the family and negatively affect adolescents' educational performance (Cross, 2023). A lack of family support may lead to adolescents' disengaging from school (Steinberg et al., 1992). For instance, adolescents who receive little attention and warmth from parents exhibit maladjustment, lower social competence, and school failure (Lamborn et al., 1991; Baumrind, 1991). In contrast, adolescents who receive warm, responsive and supportive parenting are likely to show better adjustment and academic achievement at school.

### **Exceptional Cases: Emotional Support and School Engagement**

Although emotional support from family is positively linked with adolescents' school engagement, some adolescents (about 12-16% of the sample) show a different pattern from the general population. Specifically, 52 adolescents were engaged in school despite having low levels of emotional support from their families. It is possible that these students received emotional support from teachers or peers, which helped compensate for the lack of support at home (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Supportive teachers and peers promote students' school engagement (Frederick et al., 2004). Conversely, 44 adolescents struggled with school engagement despite receiving high levels of emotional support from their families. This pattern may indicate that family emotional support alone is not sufficient for adolescents to engage in school. It is possible that these students may face challenges in school settings, such as poor relationships with teachers or peers, or academic difficulties, that constrain their school engagement (Thapa et al., 2013; Kyere et al., 2020).

### **Exceptional Cases: Instrumental Support and School Engagement**

Similar exceptional cases were found for instrumental support. While most adolescents in this study have better engagement in school with instrumental support, 59 adolescents showed high levels of school engagement despite limited instrumental support from family. It is possible that these students were able to access good resources at school, such as supportive classrooms, academic programs, and extracurricular activities, which could help meet adolescent needs, and foster their motivation and school engagement (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). It is also possible that these adolescents did not require transportation support from their families, as they may walk, take the bus or bike to school. However, factors such as distance and household income can influence how they go to school (Kontou et al., 2020; Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2021). For some adolescents, self-motivation or resilience may contribute to their engagement even in a lack of instrumental support at home (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2002; Clark 1983).

On the other hand, a notable number of 84 adolescents struggle to engage in school even with a high level of instrumental support. One possible explanation is that while instrumental support for adolescents from low-income families is associated with lower rates of failing grades (Cross, 2023), for adolescents from well-resourced families, material support alone may not ensure school engagement. Another possible reason is that these adolescents may lack academic motivation or face difficulties in learning at school (Roser et al. 1999; Bridgeland et al. 2006). In such cases, instrumental support may not be enough to help adolescents overcome the challenges they face in school.

### **General Factors Influencing School Engagement**

While family support plays a crucial role in adolescents' school engagement, the exceptional cases may indicate that the broader context also influences it. Studies suggest that

multiple aspects of the environment shape adolescents' involvement in school. These additional factors include the school environment, support from teachers and peers (Fredricks et al., 2004; Chen, 2005), self-motivation and resilience. The combination of these factors may also be magnifying the influence on academic performance (Sanders & 1998).

**School Environment.** Alongside the family, school plays a primary role in shaping and guiding adolescents' development (Simons-Morton et al., 1999). A supportive school environment provides students with strong connections and a sense of belonging, which are positively associated with academic engagement and reduced behavior problems (Simons-Morton et al., 1999). School policies significantly influence students' engagement. For example, school reforms aimed at improving student engagement such as increased teacher instruction and care, diversified students' learning tasks and supportive classroom environments positively impact students' engagement in school (Fredricks et al. 2004). A positive school climate that supports students' learning contributes to engagement (Marks 2000).

Participation in extracurricular activities may also enhance adolescents' school engagement. These activities provide students with opportunities to explore their interests and cope with challenges in school. For example, Mahoney and Cairns (1997) found that participation in extracurricular activities can reduce dropout rates among students at high risk for dropping out. However, there is inequity of participation in extracurricular activities, and students at high risk of school dropout tend to participate less than those at low risk. Team sports, in particular, have been shown to be associated with better academic motivation, performance, and reduced misbehavior (Perry-Burney & Takyi, 2002). Overall, schools can support students' achievement by creating supportive learning environments and offering programs that foster connection, mutual support, and shared academic goals.

A supportive school environment provides safety, cultural inclusion, cooperative learning, and fair discipline (Bridgeland et al., 2006). All of which can help students feel supported at school. These factors, in turn, promote students' engagement, academic achievement, and decrease school dropout and behavior problems. Conversely, the lack of such an environment can negatively affect school engagement (Thapa et al., 2013).

**Teacher Support.** Research has shown that teachers' social and academic support is positively linked to students' school engagement (Frederick et al., 2004). Such support can help reduce adolescents' negative behaviors, including smoking, alcohol use, and marijuana use. Students who receive both social and academic support from teachers are more likely to perform better academically and remain engaged in school (McNeely & Falci, 2004). Teachers' encouragement and the creation of a supportive classroom environment influence students' perceptions of themselves and of school, which in turn enhances their school engagement (Fall & Roberts, 2012). Importantly, some research suggests that teacher support may be more impactful than family support in reducing adolescents' problem behaviors at school and in improving school attendance, especially for students who are at risk of academic failure (Brewster & Bowen, 2004), possibly because teachers interact with students daily and have more knowledge about how to support students academically (Chen, 2005). Wentzel (2002) also emphasizes that teachers seem to have a strong influence on students' school-related behaviors and academic goals. Specifically, warm-demander teachers have been shown to contribute positively to the academic achievement of African American students. These teachers combine care, firm discipline and high expectations for students. This teaching style may align with a parenting style common in African American families, whereby they often use an authoritarian parenting approach that reflects both strictness and caring (Solomonson, 2008). This consistency in

expectations between family and school may enhance students' school engagement and academic performance. Additionally, culturally responsive teaching, which integrates students' cultural background into the classroom, can enhance students' engagement in class (Sandilos et al., 2017; Ware, 2006). In contrast, when adolescents lack care, encouragement or guidance from teachers, or when there is a mismatch of support between home and school, they may lead to disengagement from school. For example, Black adolescents who experience discrimination from teachers often report a lower sense of school belonging, less connections to school, and negative attitudes toward academic learning (Kyere et al., 2020).

**Peer Influence.** Peer relationships also play an important role in improving school engagement. Students' engagement in school tends to increase when they are with supportive teachers and peers (Frederick et al., 2004). Some research has found that peer influence can be stronger than parental influence on students' behavior in school. Having peers who hold positive attitudes and behaviors toward school and academics, and who behave positively, can enhance adolescents' motivation and school success (Bryant and Zimmerman 2002). Moreover, students who feel accepted by their peers tend to have a lower rate of school dropout (Farmer et al., 2003).

Negative peer influence may also hinder students' engagement in school. Peer influence is significant for students' school performance and problem behavior (Steinberg et al., 1992). Adolescents whose friends are involved in using alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, or skipping classes, tend to have similar behaviors compared with those whose friends do not engage in such problem behaviors (Hawkins et al., 1992; Fuligni et al., 2001; Bryant & Zimmerman 2002). Peer rejection and aggressive peer groups have also been linked with disengagement and school dropout (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; French & Conrad, 2001; Farmer et al., 2003).

**Intra-personal attributes.** Individual characteristics and motivation may also explain the exceptional cases. Students who are organized, possess positive self-perceptions cope with difficulties in school better are more likely to perform well in school (Clark 1983). Adolescents with high academic expectations and positive educational aspirations are at lower risk of engaging in problem behaviors such as substance use (Scheier & Botvin, 1998; Roser et al., 1999). Motivation is an important factor in adolescents' academic performance, it can serve as a protective factor against misbehavior and enhance resilience in challenging situations (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2002; Connor, 1997).

Conversely, adolescents with low motivation show lower academic performance. In one study, 69% of participants who drop out of high school reported a lack of motivation to study, and 70% of participants reported that they could graduate from high school if they attempted to do so (Bridgeland et al. 2006). This lack of motivation may develop early and intensify over time, and for some adolescents, devaluing school may reflect an attempt to protect self-esteem when experiencing academic difficulties (Roser et al. 1999). Additionally, academic challenges such as falling behind in classes or doubting their ability for academic achievement can reduce their school engagement (Bridgeland et al. 2006). Personal traits, such as aggression, may also contribute to disengagement (Farmer et al., 2003).

**Structural Inequities and Societal Barriers.** Finally, structural inequalities and systemic racism may also be a reason for disengagement. For example, Black students are disproportionately facing suspension and expulsion in schools (Owens and McLanahan, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2025). This tendency can have negative affect on adolescents' academic performance, and may increase their school dropout and long-term challenges such as unemployment (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Historical and systemic barriers placed Black families

in disadvantaged environments. Such conditions have limited quality education (McLoyd et al. 2000). As a result, some Black adolescents may internalize these barriers as problems with themselves or their identities. However, research shows that students who have strong racial identity, understand both the visible and hidden barriers they face, and believe in their ability to succeed, can be resilient in adversity (Marsh et al., 2012; Dupree et al., 2015).

Taken together, these findings suggest that children can remain well-engaged in school even in the low family support when they supported by school, teachers, peers and personal strengths. This suggests that creating a supportive environment beyond the family, especially for students who lack family support, is crucial. Future research is needed to explore the factors that help these adolescents stay engaged in school.

In sum, school engagement is influenced by a complex set of factors. Family support plays an important role in adolescents' school engagement and overall well-being. From a systems perspective, even small changes in one element can lead to meaningful differences, as all components are interconnected (Meadows, 2008). Enhancing family support for adolescents can contribute to more positive outcomes. While recognizing the crucial role of family support, it is also important to consider the broader environment and intra-personal attributes, such as family, school, teachers, peers and self-motivation, that may also be essential in shaping adolescents' educational experiences. Creating a supportive environment and positive social connections is essential for enhancing students' school engagement (Conchas, 2001).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study has several limitations. First, the data are limited in their ability to examine additional factors that may influence school engagement, such as teacher and peer support, school climate, and intra-personal attributes. Future research could explore these factors to

enable more detailed within-group comparisons. Second, the data are derived from a cross-sectional survey conducted between 2001 and 2004. Since then, changes in policy and society may have influenced family support and school engagement. Longitudinal studies could help identify how these changes influence school engagement and how they interact over time. Third, the interpretation of findings and assumptions of additional influencing factors could be strengthened by qualitative interviews with participants. Using a mixed-methods approach by incorporating qualitative data alongside quantitative data can enhance the understanding of the results.

Implications and generalizability. This study focuses on Black adolescents in the United States, and it is important to consider how Black adolescents can be supported because systemic problems have unduly affected Black adolescents. However, it is unclear whether the findings can be generalized to other ethnic groups or cultural contexts. The findings and insights into school-home relationships for Black adolescents might be similar or different if the sample included adolescents from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Further, the concept of “support” might mean something different for Black adolescents versus those from other racial and ethnic groups. For example, the concept of “warm demander” is now being used broadly to capture the kind of support many Black adolescents need and want, but different cultural socialization processes and expectations might mean that “warm demanders” behaviors and relationships with children are different across households. The meaning of “support” may also vary among Black adolescents due to differences in cultural background. For example, African American and Caribbean Black differ in ethnicity, history and values (Bryan et al., 2022). While both groups employ strictness with warmth parenting styles, Caribbean Black parenting, particularly among Haitian families, is traditionally stricter and more linked to religious values (Noel, 2021). Given

these differences, further within-group studies are important to develop tailored interventions.

The study of family support involves complex combinations, requiring ongoing research to better understand how various variables interact, as well as the different meanings given to those variables (e.g., the concept of family “support”).

Regarding the generalizability of these findings and how they may differ across contexts, consider the example of Tibetan adolescents and families. Most Tibetan students attend boarding schools starting in elementary school, which means they live far from home for long durations. The lack of daily family support can negatively impact their academic achievement, and even relatively well-resourced schools may not compensate for the absence of a family role (Tong et al., 2023). While some aspects of school engagement can be generalized, additional environmental and cultural factors are likely to influence the outcome. Therefore, more research is needed on diverse groups and educational contexts. Future research in these areas could enrich the field by providing insights for developing tailored interventions for family support and school engagement.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the limitations, this study contributes to the literature about adolescents’ positive school engagement by highlighting that a subset of adolescents, even with low levels of family support, still show strong engagement, suggesting that peer, teacher, or other individual factors may play equally important or more important roles for them. Contrasting the average finding and common perception that school engagement is strongly and positively associated with family support, our findings indicate that significant proportions of adolescents diverge and are able to thrive in school without strong family support. Conversely, subsets of youth were also struggling with school engagement even when they had high levels of family support. These findings

suggest that family support and school engagement are not closely tied for about 12% to 16% of the Black adolescent population in the US. Policy makers may consider broader factors that shape school engagement, to provide a systemic level of support to adolescents that draws on other factors outside the home to promote engagement, such as peer and teacher relationships.

In conclusion, this study found that both emotional and instrumental support from family are positively associated with Black adolescents' school engagement. Higher levels of family support are associated with greater school engagement, while lower levels of support may lead to disengagement. However, the exceptional cases, whereby adolescents are highly engaged in school despite receiving low family support, or disengaged in school despite high family support, suggest that it is important to consider additional factors beyond family, such as school environment, teacher support, peer influence and self-motivation. Identifying these factors is crucial for designing tailored, effective interventions for improving adolescents' engagement in school, which in turn, can positively affect their academic success.

**Tables****Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistic for Emotional Support (ES), Instrumental Support (IS) and School Engagement (SE)*

Variable	Min	Max	Median	Mean	SD	Skew	Kurtosis
ES	1	4	3.33	3.38	0.60	-0.87	0.33
IS	1	4	3.50	3.46	0.68	-1.19	0.64
SE	1.22	4	3.44	3.39	0.45	-1.06	1.47

**Table 2**

*Correlation Coefficients among Emotional Support (ES), Instrumental Support (IS)t and School Engagement (SE)*

Variable	ES	IS	SE
ES	-		
IS	.36**	-	
SE	.31**	.20**	-

*Note:* \*\*p<0.001

**Table 3***25% and 75% Threshold Cross -Tab of Support and School Engagement*

	ES	IS	SE
N	1170	1167	1170
25%	3.00	3.00	3.11
75%	4.00	4.00	3.67

**Table 4***Cross Tabulation*

	Emotional support High	Emotional support E-S Low	Instrumental support High	Instrumental support Low
School Engagement High	129 (35.5%)	<b>52 (13.5%)</b>	165 (28.4%)	<b>59 (16%)</b>
School Engagement Low	<b>44 (12.1%)</b>	132 (34.2%)	<b>84 (14.5%)</b>	106 (28.8%)

Figures

Figure 1

*Histogram of Emotional Support*

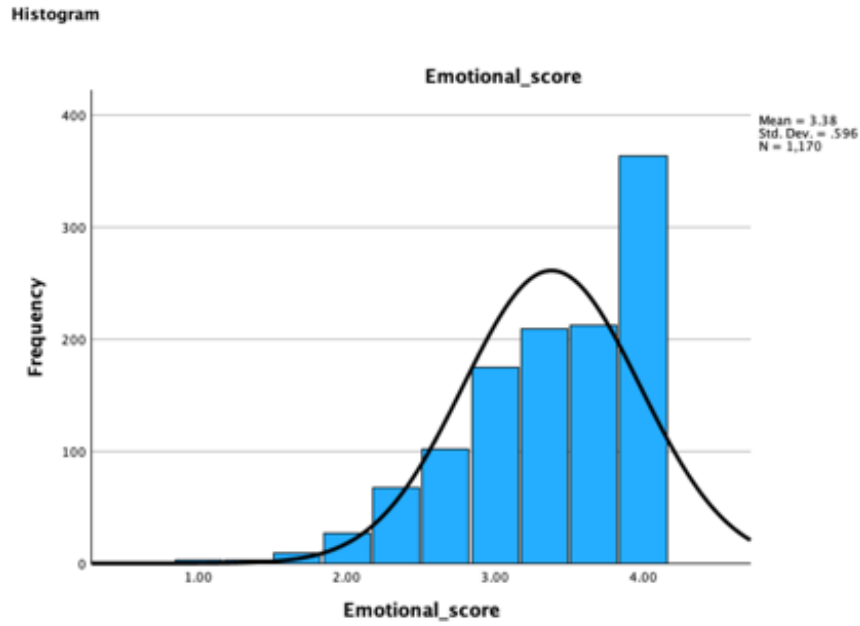
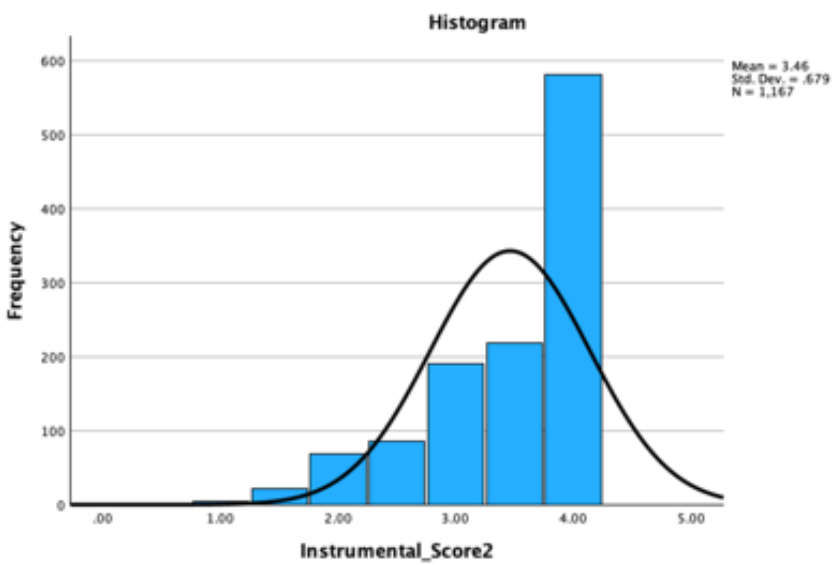


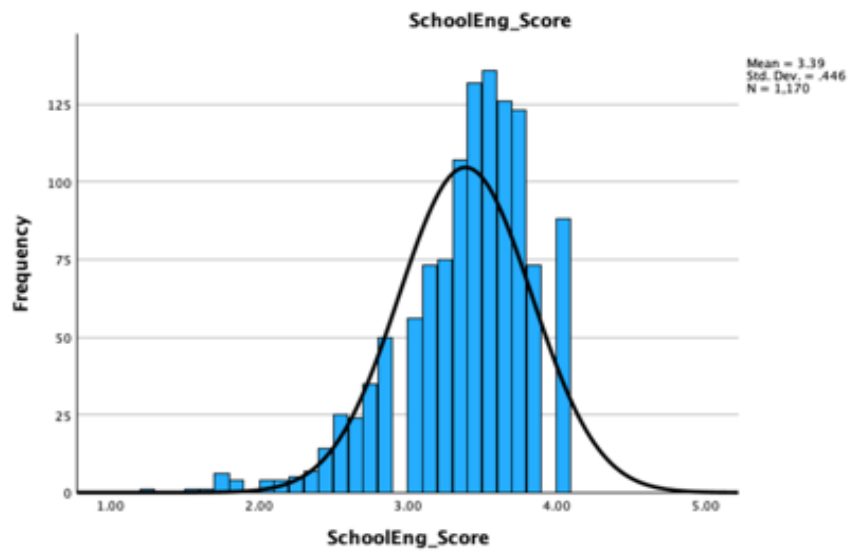
Figure 2

*Histogram of Instrumental Support*



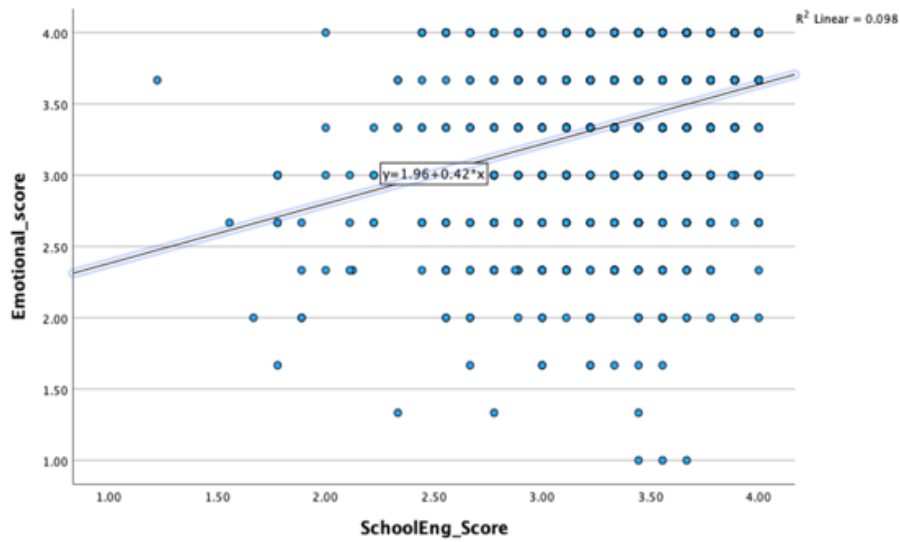
**Figure 3**

*Histogram of School Engagement*



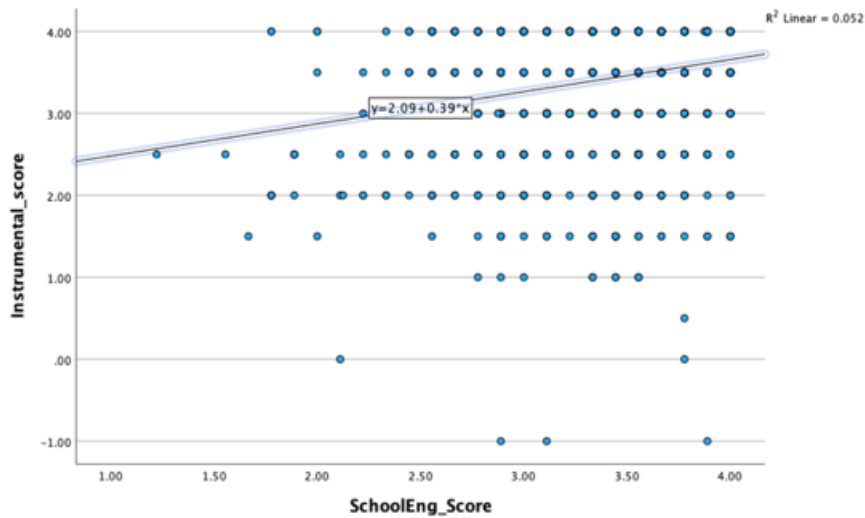
**Figure 4**

*Scatter Plot of School Engagement and Emotional Support*



**Figure 5**

*Scatter Plot of School Engagement and Instrumental Support*



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