

PERCEIVED TEACHER SUPPORT, COLLECTIVE EFFICACY IN SCHOOL, AND CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT AMONG YOUTH IN A CONFLICT-AFFECTED SOCIETY

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In conflict-affected societies, teachers are critical to supporting positive youth development and encouraging constructive societal contributions. The present research examined the role of perceived teacher support on youth collective efficacy in school and implications for constructive engagement. Recruited through their schools as part of a larger study, 395 youth (aged 15-16, evenly split by religion and gender) completed survey measures of perceived teacher support, collective efficacy in school, and two constructs assessing constructive engagement: nonviolent strategies to manage conflict and collective action for refugees. To test the effects of teacher support on constructive engagement through collective efficacy, bootstrapped mediation analysis was conducted. Collective efficacy in school mediated the link between perceived teacher support and youth's nonviolent strategies and collective action. Findings highlight the importance of teacher support and collective efficacy in promoting constructive engagement. Implications for teacher training and interventions that aim to engage youth in society are discussed.

Keywords: Teacher support; Collective efficacy; Nonviolent strategies; Collective action; Youth; Inter-group conflict; Northern Ireland.

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Youth spend a large proportion of their time in school, and it is hardly surprising, that teachers can play a vital role in preparing young people not just academically but as global citizens (Gaudelli, 2016; Marshall, 2011). As a consequence, a great deal of research attention has been given to how school curricula foster civic behaviors (e.g., Kahne et al., 2006; Torney-Purta, 2002) as well as how efficacious teachers feel to teach civic education to their students (Cavieres-Fernandez, 2014). Evidence suggests that there are a number of things that schools need to do to facilitate youth civic behaviors; teach civic content and skills, provide opportunities for discussion, promote the importance of the electoral process, and create a participative school culture (Torney-Purta, 2002). Somewhat implicit in this is that students will feel supported by teachers in a way that promotes their perceived efficacy to act civically; an assertion tested in the present research.

Efficacy beliefs influence how and when individuals will act and are associated with student outcomes including academic performance (Pajares & Johnson, 1996) and school engagement (Caraway et al., 2003). It stands to reason, therefore, that when it comes to preparing youth as global citizens, it is crucial to support the development of collective efficacy; that is, how students feel that, as a group, they can achieve

their goals. This sense of collective efficacy has been found to be a key predictor of participation in collective action (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), and among at-risk youth, associated with positive and active involvement in the community (Berg et al., 2009). Despite evidence showing the importance of collective efficacy for constructive engagement, very few studies have examined how collective efficacy in school might be facilitated by teacher support nor how such support, through collective efficacy, might be associated with youth constructive participation in society. The present research addresses these gaps in the research literature by considering participation aimed at both interpersonal or relational change, in this case nonviolent strategies in response to conflict, as well as broader structural change through collective action intentions to help others, in this case refugees. This builds directly upon the developmental peacebuilding model which argues that youth constructive engagement should be viewed across different levels of the social ecology (Taylor, 2020).

TEACHER SUPPORT AND COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

It is well established that schools and teachers have the power to influence youth outcomes within and beyond the educational domain, particularly in conflict-affected settings (e.g., Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2017; Reidy et al., 2015). Evidence demonstrates that teacher support, the extent to which “teachers listen to, encourage, and respect students” (Brewster & Bowen, 2004, p. 51), is associated with outcomes including achievement and engagement (Klem & Connell, 2004) and adjustment (Reddy et al., 2003) as well as school connectedness and healthy behaviors (McNeely & Falci, 2004). Few studies, however, have directly examined how perceived teacher support might be associated with the collective efficacy of students, despite attention being given to the importance of teacher collective efficacy in promoting student learning and student outcomes (e.g., Goddard et al., 2015; Moolenaar et al., 2012). This is an important omission; if youth feel supported by their teachers through the building of a collective community of students, this may promote feelings of efficacy among students that they can achieve within and outside of school both at an interpersonal and at a collective level.

Collective efficacy (Bandura, 2001) can be understood as how confident a group feels in its ability to achieve particular goals. Perceived collective self-efficacy in school, therefore, can be defined as how students feel supported to achieve their desired goals within and outside of the classroom environment. Collective efficacy has been argued to be crucial to understanding student performance and yet, has often been neglected in research in school settings (Goddard, 2001). Of the research that has examined collective efficacy effects in schools, the focus has tended to be on how teacher collective efficacy is associated with student achievement (Goddard, 2001; Goddard et al., 2004). To our knowledge, few studies have directly examined either the factors that influence student collective efficacy nor the effects of student collective efficacy on outcomes. This is an important gap in the research literature given how crucial collective efficacy is for constructive societal engagement. For example, collective efficacy has been found to be central in understanding collective action tendencies (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) and has been found to be associated with individuals demonstrating a more prosocial orientation, evidenced in helping, sharing and other behaviors (Bandura, 2001) and overcoming set-backs to helping (Foster-Hanson et al., 2020). Knowing the importance of collective efficacy in promoting societal engagement more broadly, therefore, it stands to reason that if a teacher supports and builds a collective ethos in school among their students that students will feel efficacious as a collective, in other words as students of that school. We argue that perceived teacher support may act as an important predictor of student collective efficacy but has yet remained under-researched. The present research, therefore, focuses on the relationship between teacher support, col-

lective efficacy, and two forms of constructive engagement in society: nonviolent strategies in response to interpersonal conflict and collective action for refugees.

COLLECTIVE EFFICACY AND CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT

In conflict-affected settings, youth engagement in the wider society has implications for the consolidation of peace (Taylor, 2020). Recognising the peacebuilding potential of youth, the present research considers two forms of action intentions that aim to support positive peace (Christie, 2006): nonviolent strategies for dealing with conflict and collective action for refugees. Whilst both are future intentions they differ in their orientation. Nonviolence can be understood as being both an approach to promoting peace and an end goal in terms of securing peace (Mayton II, 2001) with intention to use nonviolent strategies centring around youth approaches to dealing with conflict in a more general sense. Collective action intentions on the other hand, relate to the willingness to act to improve the conditions of a group (Wright et al., 1990), in this case for refugee rights. Of particular importance here, is collective action by majority group members on behalf of a minoritised outgroup. Understanding both of these action intentions enable us to determine whether teacher support and collective efficacy are associated both with an orientation toward nonviolence at the interpersonal level, as well as intention to engage in actions that would actively support a disadvantaged group at the societal level.

Research examining how, when, and why individuals might engage in nonviolence and in collective action for disadvantaged groups has primarily been conducted among adult samples. What this research has shown is the importance of factors such as collective efficacy in influencing whether individuals will act. For example, the social identity model of collective action (SIMCA; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) argues that three key processes underlie engagement in collective action: identification, efficacy beliefs, and experiences of injustice or anger. Complementing the extensive research on SIMCA, the present study examines possible predictors of efficacy beliefs in a youth sample. Specifically, we first examine if teacher support relates to feeling collectively efficacious within the school setting. Second, we examine collective efficacy relates to both nonviolent strategies to resolve conflict and collective action for refugees; this assertion is tested among youth growing up in Northern Ireland. Relatedly, the intergroup contact literature has found a link from both quantity and quality of intergroup contact and collective action intentions by majority group members (e.g., Hässler et al., 2020; Reimer et al., 2017). Therefore, we will control for these experiences to focus on the role of teachers and schools.

PRESENT RESEARCH

Youth growing up in Northern Ireland are experiencing a fragile peace; they were born following the 1998 peace agreement but are exposed to the legacy of conflict. The conflict in Northern Ireland is an ethno-religious conflict that goes back centuries (McKeown, 2013) between those, put simply, who identify as Catholic (around 45%) and those who identify as Protestant (around 48%). The most recent period of conflict, known colloquially as “the Troubles,” resulted from a series of civil rights and economic disputes as well as differences in opinion on the constitutional state of the island of Ireland (Cairns & Darby, 1998). During the height of the conflict there were more than 3,600 politically motivated deaths and over 30,000 injuries (Fitzduff & O’Hagan, 2009). The conflict is said to have come to an end following the signing and

implementation of the Good Friday/Belfast Peace agreement which locked both groups into a power-sharing arrangement and institutionalized policies of intergroup equality.

Northern Ireland remains a highly divided society (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006) and low levels of conflict continue (Taylor et al., 2016). It is estimated that around 94% of children and young people attend a religiously separate (Protestant or Catholic) school, that one in four adolescents is a victim of sectarian violence (Jarman, 2005), and over 80% have experienced sectarianism directly or indirectly (Byrne et al., 2005). In settings of intergroup conflict (Barber & Schluterman, 2009) more research is needed to understand which factors help to foster young people to become engaged citizens and participate in constructive social interactions (Yates & Youniss, 2006).

Previous research in Northern Ireland has looked at individual (McKeown & Taylor, 2017; Taylor et al., 2018) and family-level (Taylor et al., 2019) predictors of constructive youth engagement but has not considered the role of teacher support in understanding constructive youth action. Addressing a gap in current understanding, therefore, the present research examines the role of perceived teacher support on youth collective efficacy in school and the implications for constructive engagement among youth in Northern Ireland; specifically, nonviolent strategies and collective action intentions for refugees. To isolate the effects for collective action, we also control for previous contact with ethnic minorities. Based on previous theoretical and empirical literature, it was hypothesized that perceiving teachers to be supportive would be associated with youth feeling more collectively efficacious in school, which in turn would be positively associated with more nonviolent strategies as a response to conflict and higher collective action intentions for refugees in Belfast. Our focus on these two youth outcomes, at the interpersonal and societal level, are particularly important to consolidating peace (Taylor, 2020).

METHOD

Participants

This research draws on the second wave of data from a larger two-wave study on positive youth development in Northern Ireland.¹ Participants ($n = 395$) aged 15-16 years old (52% male, 48% female; 47% Catholic, 53% Protestant) were recruited from Year 11 classes in eight schools, both controlled (i.e., predominantly Protestant) and maintained (i.e., predominantly Catholic), in urban and semi-urban areas of Northern Ireland. To control for pupil and school demography, schools were matched on the percentage of pupils receiving free school meals (range 30 to 65%) and recruited from both interfaced (where a controlled and maintained school are separated by a physical boundary or peace wall) and noninterfaced areas.

Materials and Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee at Queen's University Belfast prior to data collection. Following approved consent procedures, data were collected in a single day by a team of trained research assistants. Situated in computer classrooms, youth individually completed the online survey in Qualtrics during their regular class time in the presence of the research assistants and their teacher. The questionnaire took approximately 20-35 minutes to complete, based on the pupils' reading comprehension. Schools (£100) and classes (£25 each) were allocated modest compensation for their time. Pupils who

completed both time points also received an individual incentive (£10 each). The data from pupils who were not from the Catholic or Protestant community ($n = 34$) completed an alternative version of the survey; their data were excluded from this analysis.

Measures

In addition to a reporting on demographics (gender, community background), youth completed a series of measures relating to their experiences growing up in Northern Ireland. The measures reported below were completed in Wave 2 only.

Perceived teacher support. To measure perceived teacher support, youth were asked to respond to an amended 10 item version of the teacher support subscale of the classroom environment scale (Moos & Trickett, 1987). Specifically, the teacher support subscale was adapted in three ways: (1) an additional item asking youth to report the extent to which they trusted teachers was added, (2) response points were changed from true/false to a 1-7 Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*), and (3) children was changed to pupils, to reflect the terminology used in the Northern Ireland context. Thinking about their fellow pupils and schools, youth responded to items such as “Teachers take a personal interest in pupils,” “Teachers go out of their way to help pupils,” and “Pupils have to watch what they say.” High scores reflected higher levels of perceived teacher support ($\alpha = .81$).

Collective efficacy in school. Adapted from Smith et al.’s (2013) collective efficacy scale, youth were asked to respond to 12 items relating to their willingness to intervene in a series of school-based situations. Youth reported their responses on a 0-6 Likert scale (*not at all* to *very much*) to statements such as “If we see one pupil hurting another, we would tell them to stop,” “We help each other when we have problems,” and “Pupils know how to stick up for another pupil who is being hurt or treated badly.” Following exploratory factor analysis (EFA), 10 of the 12 items were retained to measure collective efficacy in school. A higher score indicates higher levels of collective efficacy in school ($\alpha = .92$).

Nonviolent strategies. Adapted from Bosworth et al. (1999) 4-point scale, youth were asked to rate how likely they were, using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*very likely*) to 7 (*very likely*), to respond in each of eight different ways when they found themselves really angry at someone or something. Following EFA, these eight items were reduced to a single-factor 3-item solution to measure intention to engage in nonviolent strategies in response to conflict. The three items included: “Try to talk it out,” “Try to see the other person’s point of view,” and “Try to reduce my anger.” Higher scores indicated more engagement in nonviolent responses to conflict ($\alpha = .71$).

Collective action intentions. Adapted from van Zomeren, Spears, and Leach (2008) and Cakal et al. (2011), to measure collective action intentions for refugees in Belfast youth were asked to rate on a 0-6 Likert scale how likely they were (*not at all* to *very*) to: “Participate in a demonstration to support refugee rights in Belfast,” “Sign a petition to improve the current situation for refugees in Belfast,” “Do something with fellow pupils to support refugees in Belfast,” and “Sign up for a neighbourhood project to support refugees in Belfast.” Higher scores indicated greater collective action intentions ($\alpha = .94$).

Minority experiences and minority friends. As a control, youth experiences and friendship with ethnic minority groups were assessed. Using items developed for Northern Ireland (ARK, 2021), participants indicated (a) whether they have had contact (that is anything more than just a greeting) and (2) whether any of their friends were from the following ethnic groups: Black (African, Caribbean), South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi), Chinese, Irish Traveller, Portuguese, Filipino, Polish, Bulgarian,

Romanian, Other Eastern European, or an open-ended question to indicate another group. Higher scores indicated greater experience with ethnic minority groups and more ethnic minority friends.

Data Analytic Plan

To estimate the bootstrapped indirect effects for the mediation model of interest, we estimated the effects using maximum likelihood estimation in structural equation modelling framework in MPlus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2011). Each of the measurement models will be fitted using an exploratory factor analysis approach, and evaluated with the criteria of a Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) and comparative fit index (CFI) $\geq .90$, root mean square residual (RMSEA) and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) $\leq .08$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The final structural model will also be evaluated using these criteria.

RESULTS

Measurement Models

The measurement models for each latent construct were fitted in Mplus using maximum likelihood estimation, which produces unbiased estimate assuming that data are missing at random (Enders, 2010). Latent factors were created using the best fitting items for each scale.

For the 10-item teacher support scale, the best fitting model was a second-order factor consisting of two first-order factors and a single manifest indicator (*Teachers spend very little time just talking with pupils*) that in the original EFA loaded onto each factor. The first-order factors, in essence, captured the two types of response scales; that is, the first factor had the five positively worded items (*Teachers go out of their way to help pupils*), while the second factor was the remaining four reverse-coded items (*Teachers “talk down” to pupils*). Thus, the latent variables for teacher support, two first-order factors (positive and negative worded items, separately) and an item that had loaded onto both lower order factors, was a good fit to the data — $\chi^2(33) = 110.82, p < .05$; CFI = .93; TLI = .90; SRMR = .057; RMSEA = .077, 95% CI [.062, .093].

For the 12-item collective efficacy in school measure, the screen plot and Eigen values greater than 1 both indicated a single-factor solution for 10 of the 12 items which was an adequate fit to the data — $\chi^2(35) = 319.04, p < .05$; CFI = .88; TLI = .84; SRMR = .053; RMSEA = .143, 95% CI [.129, .158]. In addition, all of the factor loadings were strong and relatively consistent (e.g., range .58 to .82).

For the eight-item nonviolent strategies in response to conflict, the scree plot and Eigen values suggested a one- or two-factor solution. The fully justified solution, which also had consistently high factor loadings, was a three-item single factor.

A single factor solution to the four items assessing collective action intentions for refugees was a good fit to the data — $\chi^2(2) = 9.87, p < .05$; CFI = .993; TLI = .98; SRMR = .008; RMSEA = .100, 95% CI [.044, .166]. Each of these latent constructs were then used in the full model test.

Hypothesised Model

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, ranges, and bivariate correlations for all of the variables in the model. It was hypothesised that perceiving teacher support would be associated with youth feeling more collectively efficacious in school, which in turn would be positively associated with more nonviolent strategies as a response to conflict and higher collective action intentions for refugees in Belfast.

TABLE 1
Means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations for all study variables ($N = 395$)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Perceived teacher support	4.36	0.91	0-7	-	.46***	.24***	.39***	-.01	-.08	.04	.02
2. Collective efficacy in school	3.57	1.25	0-6		-	.49***	.52***	.73***	-.37***	.11*	.06
3. Collective action intentions for refugees	2.64	1.84	0-6			-	.39***	.45***	-.50***	.19***	.15**
4. Nonviolent strategies	4.44	1.38	1-7				-	.20***	-.12*	.15**	.16**
5. Girl		52.5% male/ 47.5% female						-	.73***	.45***	.20***
6. Protestant		47% Catholic/ 53% Protestant							-	-.50***	-.12*
7. Minority experiences	2.41	2.13	0-10							-	.15**
8. Minority friends	1.08	1.26	0-6								-

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The bias-corrected bootstrapped mediation with 1,000 replications was fitted in MPlus and was an adequate fit to the data — $N = 395$, $\chi^2(408) = 1007.50$, $p < .05$; CFI = .90; TLI = .88; SRMR = .063; RMSEA = .055, 95% CI [.051, .060]; Figure 1. Regarding the demographic controls, compared to boys, girls reported higher collective efficacy in school ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$) and collective action intentions ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$); there was no gender difference for intention to adopt nonviolent strategies. Compared to those from the Catholic community, Protestants reported lower collective action intentions ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .001$) and collective efficacy ($\beta = -.17$, $p < .01$), and higher intentions to adopt nonviolent strategies ($\beta = .14$, $p < .05$). Having a greater number of experiences with minorities was not related to any of the endogenous variables, while having a greater number of minority friends was positively related to intentions to adopt nonviolent strategies ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$).

The structural paths were significant in the hypothesised directions. Higher scores on the perceived teacher support scale were found to be related to greater collective efficacy in school ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$). Higher collective efficacy in school was also related to greater intentions to adopt nonviolent strategies in response to conflict ($\beta = .43$, $p < .001$) as well as greater collective action intentions for refugees ($\beta = .25$, $p < .001$). The direct path from perceived teacher support to collective action intentions was not sig-

nificant but remained significant to nonviolent strategy intentions ($\beta = .19, p < .05$). The indirect effects to both adopt nonviolent strategies, $\beta = .19, 95\% \text{ CI } [.11, .27]$, and collective action intentions, $\beta = .11, 95\% \text{ CI } [.10, .33]$ were significant. In sum, collective efficacy in school mediated the link between perceived teacher support and youth's nonviolent strategies and collective action intentions.

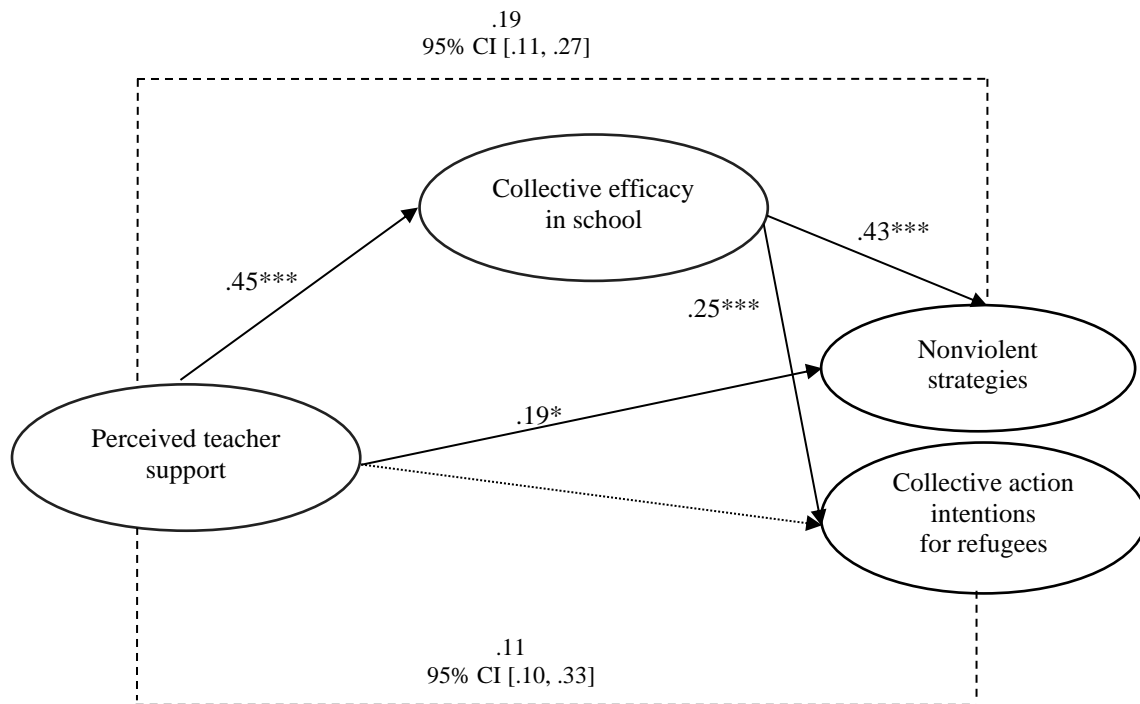


FIGURE 1

Bootstrapped mediation model of the indirect effect of perceived teacher support on collective action intentions for refugees and intention to adopt nonviolent strategies in response to conflict, via collective efficacy in school among Belfast youth ($N = 395$).

Note. Demographic controls left off for readability. Endogenous variables allowed to correlate. Standardized regression coefficients reported. Nonsignificant paths indicated with dotted lines and indirect effects depicted with a dashed line.

DISCUSSION

Schools and teachers can support constructive youth outcomes beyond the school gates, facilitating the development of youth into global citizens (Gaudelli, 2016; Marshall, 2011). Building on previous research that has separately demonstrated the role of teachers and collective efficacy in supporting contrastive action, the present research examined the role of perceived teacher support on youth collective efficacy and the implications for two forms of constructive action: intention to use nonviolent strategies in response to conflict and intention to engage in collective action for refugees. This research was conducted among youth born after the 1998 peace agreement in Northern Ireland.

Results demonstrate that perceived teacher support was directly associated with nonviolent strategies to dealing with conflict and greater collective efficacy in school. This finding adds to research on the integral role of teacher support for outcomes including achievement (Klem & Connell, 2004), adjustment (Reddy et al., 2003), and school connectedness and healthy behaviors (McNeely & Falci, 2004). It was also found that collective efficacy in school was associated with nonviolent strategies and collective action for

refugees. The latter effect was found even taking into consideration youth's own contact experiences and friendships with ethnic minorities. This finding aligns with established research on demonstrating that collective efficacy is a key mechanism for engagement in collective action (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) and further demonstrates the importance of collective efficacy for nonviolent action intentions at the interpersonal or relational level. Moreover, collective efficacy in school mediated the link between perceived teacher support and youth's intentions to use nonviolent strategies and collective action for refugees. To our knowledge, the present research is the first to observe this finding, offering a new insight into how schools and teachers can support students to constructively engage in society.

These collective findings have important implications for theory and practice. Theoretically, the present research identifies teacher support as a predictor of collective efficacy and finds that it is one mechanism through which teacher support is associated with youth intention to engage constructively in society at the interpersonal and the societal levels. To our knowledge this finding has not been previously established and, therefore, opens up a new area of research to explore how, when, and why teacher support might be associated with different forms of constructive action. Knowing that perceived teacher support can facilitate collective efficacy, and in turn societal engagement, also has important implications for practice. Specifically, these findings suggest that teacher training programmes should incorporate strategies to support students in ways that boost their collective efficacy, and further that existing civic and general education programmes should target collective efficacy if they are to ensure that students actively engage in society. This may have important implications directly for conflict settings where the focus on intervention at the school level may be particularly relevant as a mean to support peacebuilding efforts that go beyond the school gates, trickling into peace efforts at the societal level.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the findings of the present research contribute to a new understanding of the roles of both teacher support and collective efficacy on constructive youth action, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this work. First, our findings rest on a cross-sectional survey which means that causality cannot be determined. Future work should aim to experimentally prime teacher support to determine how it may be associated in a causal relationship with collective efficacy and different forms of constructive action. Second, the present research only considered collective efficacy and not other potential mediators in the relationship between teacher support and constructive engagement. Future research might also control for self-efficacy or following a social-identity approach (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), for example, might include other mechanisms, such as the extent to which students identify with being students and perceive societal injustice to be present. Finally, although we include two types of constructive outcomes at the interpersonal and societal levels, both scales assessed intentions. A third area for future research would be to measure actual behaviors or even self-report of past behaviors to extend the current findings beyond action intentions.

CONCLUSION

Evidence demonstrates that school and teacher support can play a vital role in supporting youth to develop academically and as global citizens which may be particularly important for youth growing up in conflict societies. Building on previous research which has examined youth constructive action in society,

the present research demonstrates, for the first time, that perceived teacher support is associated with collective efficacy in school and that this, in turn, is associated with youth reporting greater intentions to use nonviolent strategies and engage in collective action for refugees. Going beyond the explorations of constructive action at single levels of analysis (e.g., interpersonal or societal) the present findings offer new insight into how schools and teachers may facilitate constructive youth behaviors outside of the school gates by encouraging both teacher support and collective efficacy. These findings offer support for how schools and teachers may support peacebuilding efforts in divided societies such as Northern Ireland.

NOTE

1. The variables of interest in this study, perceived teacher support, collective efficacy in school, and collective action, were not collected in Wave 1.

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