Perceived Social Support through Students' Drawings in the Fundamental Learning Stage

Grigoriță Mălina-Elena

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Iași

malinagrigorita@yahoo.com

DOI: 10.63467/alls15.art14

Abstract

This study explores how students in the early years of primary education (preparatory class, first grade, and second grade) understand and perceive social support in the school environment through the analysis of their drawings and verbal explanations. Students were asked to draw "a day at school when someone helped them," and the analysis focused on the content of the drawings, the use of symbols, colours, emotions, and depicted relationships, as well as the students' verbal presentations. The results revealed that students perceive social support as largely provided by peers and teachers, in the form of concrete assistance (such as lending a pen, sharing a snack) and emotional encouragement. A positive perception of their social environment was reflected through symbols (hearts, stars, the sun, and butterflies) and warm colours (red, yellow, and pink). The larger drawings of certain figures indicate their emotional significance. This study highlights that drawing is a highly useful tool for teachers, allowing them to identify students' emotional and social needs, particularly among young children, and providing a natural means of expression. Drawing can be used both individually and in group settings to observe the

dynamics of relationships, but it is important that interpretations are approached with caution and with careful respect for the child's privacy.

Keywords: perceived social support, students, drawing, teacher-student relationship, emotional support.

1. Introduction

At the age of fundamental acquisition (6–8 years), primary school students form their basic skills and develop their social-emotional skills. More often than not, pupils express and communicate through drawing, especially if it is about feelings and emotions. Not infrequently, the class teacher receives a special drawing as a token of gratitude from the pupil who wanted to express his/her appreciation for the support.

In the literature (Barrera et al., 1981; Coffman & Gilligan, 2002; Vedder et al., 2005), *social support* is a set of emotional, informational, and instrumental resources provided by a social network (family, friends, colleagues, and teachers) that helps a person cope with difficult situations, regulate emotions, and maintain psychological well-being, thus contributing to adaptation in various social contexts, personal development, and, in general, life satisfaction.

2. Literature Review

A study by Rautanen et al. (2020) analysed how primary school children's perceived social support (from teachers, parents, and friends) affects their participation and engagement in activities in an educational context. The results showed that children's participation in learning is largely influenced by perceived social support, which contributes to their motivation, energy and commitment to school. We found that teachers have the greatest impact among all sources of support. Students who receive emotional (encouragement, appreciation), informational (advice, feedback), and instrumental (resources needed for studying) support typically have a more

positive attitude towards school, are more resilient in the face of obstacles, and invest a consistent effort in academic activities. Even when other socio-demographic characteristics are taken into account, social support from parents and instructors has a noteworthy and favourable effect on students' resilience; in addition, children who report higher levels of support usually have better overall health (Stewart & Sun, 2004).

In general, social support has a positive impact, but in relation to students from socio-economically sensitive backgrounds, its valences are articulated, being an important variable. Having a formative and emotionally supportive role, especially for vulnerable children, social support is considered a preventive factor; it is directly related to self-regulation, life satisfaction and reduction of risk behaviours (Veteška et al., 2020).

At the age of fundamental acquisition, creativity is often expressed through drawing. In this sense, drawing has the potential for multimodal expression in that it is not limited to its artistic function but also to others, such as communication, cognitive development and exploration of the world around us (Hall, 2009).

It is important to address John Bowlby's attachment theory (1989) because it underscores the importance of early and stable relationships between the child and primary attachment figure (traditionally mother but not necessarily). John Bowlby shows us that such affective bonds are not merely emotional but are very important for the child to physically survive and socially develop. Secure attachments supply the child with a 'secure base' (Bowlby & Solomon, 1989, p.156) that they are able to use for actively exploring the world but insecure attachments result in emotional and behavioural problems. Attachment development has the following number of stages: first, the baby prefers his mother's voice and face and as time goes on, an emotional closeness develops which is sustained through twitching, crying, smiling and clinging. If the separation is to happen, then the child's emotional reactions (protest, despair, then apparent detachment) are accepted as natural, they are a part of and a process of the establishment of an 'internal working model' (Bowlby & Solomon, 1989, p.155) of self and others.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1972) provides a useful basis for understanding how social support and drawing as a means of communication help promote children's development at the stage of fundamental acquisition (ages 6–8 years). Vîgotski argued that children's cognitive skills are acquired through the support of more competent adults or peers; therefore, learning is deeply rooted in social interactions (Vîgotski apud Pathan et al., 2018).

The multi-dimensional analysis by Clabaugh, G. K. (2010), who explored Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, states that in Vygotsky's view, society is the bearer of cultural heritage, without which cognitive development is impossible and therefore plays an important role in the development of the child's mind. According to him, every child's higher mental ability emerges first at the social (interpersonal and interpsychological) level and is then absorbed at the personal (intrapsychological) level. He emphasises that education should be seen as a process based on real social and cultural contexts, not as an artificially produced environment only.

Applying Vygotsky's theory in the context of the present research, we will refer to the Zone of Proximal Development or ZPD: when a child draws, when she has this material to use, she can explore ideas, concepts and emotions above her current level, but accessible with help of an adult (parent, teacher) or peer. For instance, a child is going to draw a complicated story; for his idea to be completed, he will need directed questions ("what's going on here?", "what does the house look like?"), or practical assistance ("can you add windows here?"). Relying on step by step scaffolding (adult support) the child progress from simple graphic play to drawing for more sophisticated purposes: storytelling, expressing emotions, explaining concepts. In these connections, children enhance their graphic skills, as well as their language skills, narrative thinking, planning and self-regulation.

Development during the period of fundamental acquisition depends to a large extent on social support, which is also closely linked to school performance and emotional and social well-being. The essential components for school adjustment and the acquisition of cognitive skills, confidence, motivation and a sense of belonging are built partly through supportive interactions

with adults (parents, teachers) and peers. From the perspective of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, social support on a daily basis helps the child and shapes learning, thus widening the zone of proximal development. Therefore, social support is not a direct protective element but rather a necessary component in the child's formation and development in school and beyond.

3. Research Methodology

The present study aims to explore how 64 students from the basic acquisition curricular cycle (preparatory, first and second grade) perceive social support in the school environment, using as the main method the analysis of the drawings they made, as well as the way of presenting the drawing. The students participating in the study had to draw a picture based on the task, "Draw a day at school when you felt that someone helped you," in 45 minutes.

Ethical and deontological principles were taken into account in the conduct of the study, permission was obtained from the student's parents to participate, anonymity was also ensured and the participation and results were used strictly in the context of the research.

In interpreting the drawings in relation to the social support (Burkitt, 2004; Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011):

→ the presentation of the drawing by the drawer;

→ integration of elements as a whole;

→ attention to repetition and recurring symbols;

→ attention to colour and size;

→ relation to the social environment;

→ feelings emphasised.

The aim of the study is to identify and understand the pupils' perceptions of the social support offered in the school environment in the basic acquisition cycle, as reflected both in the content of the drawings and in the way they are presented verbally. The study aims to highlight the role that support from teachers, peers and other adults plays in children's lives and how these

relationships are internalised and expressed through the graphic representations. At the same time, the research aims to explore the potential of drawing as a qualitative method of investigation in the study of children's subjective perceptions and experiences.

The objectives of the study are:

- To analyse students' drawings in order to identify their perceptions and representations of social support in the school environment.

- To identify the feelings associated with social support as reflected in the drawing and in the verbal presentation (e.g., joy, security, fear, isolation).

- To identify the main sources of social support perceived by children (teachers, peers, parents) and how these are reflected in the graphic and symbolic elements of the drawings.

- To formulate practical recommendations for teachers on the use of drawing as a tool for understanding pupils' emotional and social needs.

4. Results and Discussions

In the 64 drawings made by students, the following can be highlighted:

→ Most of the drawings show colleagues, friends or family members (mom, dad or siblings), and in some there are also figures of adults who are presented as teachers.

→ In many cases, the support comes from peers, indicating the importance of equal, equitable relationships (34 of the drawings).

→ In other cases, the central figure is the teacher, offering protection or guidance (30 of the drawings).

→ Social support is provided through concrete support (figures/characters appear giving objects or standing nearby, suggesting cooperation), affective elements (hearts and expressions on the faces – smiles – indicate affection, symbolic hugs, and understanding), and support through talking (some drawings include dialogue lines, balloons or gestures suggesting conversation).

→ Smiles on the drawn faces are predominant, suggesting an overall positive mood perceived by the pupils, expressing feelings of integration, support.

→ One drawing shows neutral or more serious faces, which could suggest either concentration or a more sober context.

→ The feelings conveyed through the drawings are those of joy, security, tranquillity, affection, gratitude, trust, enthusiasm, cheerfulness, courage, belonging, contentment, and relaxation.

→ The absence of detailed faces in some works indicates either the stage of graphic development or a focus on other elements (context, action).

→ The symbols used are hearts (clear symbols of affection and love), stars, butterflies, rainbow, suns (symbols of joy, optimism and hope), houses, and schools (indicating the safe and familiar environment in which social support occurs).

→ Warm and bright colours (red, yellow, pink) predominate and indicate a positive perception of the social environment in which they carry out their activities (58 drawings).

→ Colour balance and lack of crowding suggest harmony and a perceived positive social environment.

→ The repetition of hearts and human figures in pairs or groups shows the children's emphasis on affective relationships and belonging.

According to the analysis of the students' drawings, social support, expressed through friendly relationships with teachers, peers, and even family members, is seen as a fundamental component of their school lives. Children reflect their fundamental need for security and belonging by illustrating social support in their drawings through help received, gestures of emotional support and the reassuring presence of close people. The bright colours and symbols, such as hearts, stars, and butterflies, indicate a good overall picture of these relationships; the larger size of some characters suggests their emotional relevance. Repetition of themes, including groups of friends or the presence of sunshine and hearts, promotes children's vision of constant and consistent social support in their lives. Therefore, the drawings reflect lived reality

and provide access to understanding how students view, internalise, and communicate the supportive relationships that impact their emotional and social development.

The drawings made by pupils in the basic acquisition curriculum cycle provide a complex picture of how they perceive social support in the school environment, especially as it is a form of indirect exploration of social support, given the age range (6-8 years). These drawings show not only the actual relationships but also the symbols and emotional needs through which these relationships are internalised. From an integrative perspective, we link the presence of peers, teachers, and occasionally family to social support. Peers are mainly represented by mutual help and play, teachers by guidance and protection, and family by affective support and emotional protection.

Interestingly, in addition to these visual cues, the way the drawings are presented verbally confirms and amplifies the symbolic meanings, providing details about the feelings experienced and the relevant social context. Vygotsky's (1972) socio-cultural theory emphasises the role of social interactions in children's emotional and cognitive development; drawings are a means of symbolic expression and mediation of children's experiences. The results also show that drawing can be used not only as a tool for assessing emotions but also as an educational method through which teachers can help students to discuss their own emotions, identify unmet needs and promote social inclusion. This integrative approach confirms that drawing is a means to access children's inner world. It provides both relevant qualitative data for research and a useful tool for educational interventions that focus on pupils' social-emotional needs.

Regarding the students' descriptions of the drawings, we summarize in **Table 1** some of their descriptions in order to highlight the correlation with perceived social support.

No.	Drawing Description	Perceived Social Support
1.	"Here I am with my friend, they help me when I don't know what to do at school and we play together."	Support from peers through concrete help and emotional support, cooperation, and group integration.
2.	"Here I am with my classmate; she gave me a pencil when I didn't have one, and I was very happy, so I drew a heart and stars."	Material help, accompanied by appreciation and affective gratitude (symbolised by the heart and stars).
3.	"I drew myself with my teacher. She helps me learn and explains things when I don't understand. I drew a heart on her blouse to show I love her and feel good with her. She's holding a stick to show us lessons."	Educational and emotional support from the teacher, perceived through explanations and encouragement; positive perception of school the teacher's role.
4.	"I drew my classroom, where the teacher helps all of us."	Collective support from the teacher towards the entire class; feeling of protection and safety from the adult figure.
5.	"I drew a beautiful day at school, with a rainbow and sun, and below is the school where my friend helped me when I didn't know something."	Support from a friend in solving a difficulty at school, in a positive context (rainbow, sun), suggests a secure, optimistic environment.
6.	"It's me with my teacher, who helps me with my homework."	Support from the teacher, perceived as concrete help with learning tasks.
7.	"I'm here with my teacher, who held my hand when I was sad."	Emotional support from the teacher, expressed by the gesture of holding hands, is a sign of closeness and reassurance.
8.	"I drew my school and my friend who gave me food when I forgot my lunch."	Practical and emotional help from a peer (sharing food), associated with empathy and care.
9.	"In the drawing is the day when I felt sick and the teacher helped and cared for me."	Emotional and practical support from the teacher in a vulnerable situation (illness), showing care and safety.
10.	"This is the day when the teacher called us with the bell and my friend held my hand to go together into the classroom."	Emotional and social support manifested through guidance and reassurance, reinforcing a sense of belonging.

Table 1. Descriptions of students' drawings

The students' descriptions, as well as their interpretation according to criteria from the literature, show that perceived social support in the school environment varies and includes both concrete help (borrowing an object, homework help, and sharing food) and emotional support (encouragement, hand-holding and affectionate gestures). Relationships with teachers are associated with cooperation, friendship, and belonging to the group, whereas relationships with peers are perceived as a source of protection, safety, and support. Affective symbols, such as stars and hearts, together with the positive context of the drawings, such as rainbows and sunshine, convey a positive and optimistic image of the school environment. In general, pupils' drawings and explanations emphasise the importance of social support in creating a sense of emotional security and social integration at school.

By using drawing as a tool to learn about students' emotional and social needs, teachers can learn about their students' needs, offering them a natural and easy means of expression. At the same time, teachers can suggest that students draw as a standard activity, both in moments of relaxation and in guided situations, to describe their experiences, situations or relationships that are important to them. However, teachers should be attentive to the symbols and colours used, as well as the facial expressions drawn, as these can reveal how the child is feeling. As important as it is to encourage children to talk about their drawings, verbal communication will also highlight essential points associated with children's experiences and perceptions. Teachers can analyse drawings to identify appropriate social relationships with students, including peers, and can observe these relationships in dynamics. However, it is crucial to interpret drawings cautiously, respecting the child's privacy and avoiding hasty and incorrect conclusions. Furthermore, drawing in group activities can enhance social cohesion and provide the teacher with the opportunity to detect how students cooperated and shared roles. In cases of anxiety, isolation, or conflict identified in drawings, teachers can collaborate with the school counsellor to transform the drawing from a mirror of the emotional state into a starting point for effective and specific interventions.

5. Practical Implications for Teachers

Drawings can also present palpable indications of students' emotional and social needs; thus, teachers should apply this method not only as an artistic activity but also as an observation method and educational and emotional support tool. The use of this method should be done carefully by teachers to experience the benefits of drawing as a form of education and emotional support. Thematic drawing guidance can be used by the students to depict a given scenario, for example, a school day when they got a helping hand or had fun. The exercise may enable them to easily access their thoughts and experience and provide a non-invasive and natural medium for expression. Prompts on the meaning of characters and symbols in the drawings help to verbalise and strengthen emotional reflection with pupils. Teachers need to understand drawings in context, avoid vague conclusions, and supplement their visual observations with information from other educational and behavioural sources. Drawing, individual and group, can become a useful aid to observing how relationship dynamics work and determining social-emotional needs with the goal of establishing a compassionate and open school environment which contributes to the child's overall full development.

The use of drawing in educational activities may prove to be an effective way of discovering pupils' emotional and social needs and giving them a natural and easy method of expression. For the realisation of maximum potential for this method, teachers should be structured and sensitive in their attitude towards drawing-based activity, allowing free expression as well as close "reading" of drawings.

A first strategy could be the use of guided thematic drawing: in this way, the pupils are invited to draw specific situations, for instance, 'Draw a day at school when you felt helped' or 'Draw a moment when you were pleased with your classmates'. This activity provides teachers with information about pupils' perceptions of social support in their school environment and with glimpses of interpersonal relationships in the school environment. To achieve the same, another suggested approach involves the development of a portfolio of social-emotional drawings, where

pupils are encouraged to create familiar drawings of school-related experiences as a regular exercise. An analysis of these works can enable observation of the emotional and social development of every child and the possible relational or emotional problems.

After interpreting the drawings, students should engage in a guided discussion where they can articulate and clarify the visual representations they have made. This dialogue will help them to understand their intentions and meanings, hence avoiding their preconception of symbolic meanings. It is also possible to use drawing in the activities of school counselling as a kind of opening up channels of communication with pupils, especially with the more shy or withdrawn pupils, by using drawing as a framework of non-verbal communication of feelings.

Teachers are recommended to use a few methodological guidelines for interpreting drawings in an ethical and effective manner. First off, it would be helpful to ask the pupil what the drawing meant, to comment on common recurring patterns in several drawings of the same child and to refrain from conclusions based on an isolated work. Secondly, consider the drawing in the context of the student's relationships with their family, peers, and school. Finally, privacy for the child and avoiding intrusive or evaluative interpretations are a must to keep him/her safe emotionally and maintain his/her trust.

It is important for drawing to not be regarded as the only source of pupils' emotional or social state assessment but as the means that can be used in addition to other assessment and observation methods. Utilising drawing as a method of expression and reflection, teachers can support the creation of an empathic and inclusive climate, emotional safety, and deep awareness of pupils' needs and nurture their holistic development.

6. Conclusions

Social support can play a crucial role in shaping students' impressions and experiences during the foundational learning cycle, being associated with both emotional support and practical assistance obtained within the educational environment. According to the findings, students

identify teachers, classmates, and, to a lesser extent, parents as the main sources of social support. These figures play significant roles in their daily learning and shared play activities. The manifestations of support range from affective gestures, such as hugs, emotional reassurance, and encouragement, to tangible assistance with academic tasks or social events. The use of warm colours (red, yellow, pink), along with frequently recurring symbols (hearts, stars) that convey a positive impression of the school's social environment, suggests that this environment is perceived as highly desirable.

Teachers are therefore given the task to use drawing not as a solitary assessment tool but as a member of a larger educational team. Individual or group sessions discussing drawing as a guided procedure may help pupils to formalise their intentions and voice verbally the course of events and plans visualised graphically. In situations where the drawings are suggesting anxiety, isolation or conflict, the teacher can then work with the school counsellor, turning it into a point of departure for individualised interventions and specific emotional support.

At the same time, drawing can be used as a form of promoting social cohesion by way of shared actions that favour sharing and discussion of the experiences portrayed graphically. In that sense the pupils' drawings do not only represent a lived reality but actually become a means of communicating and deepening our perception of kids' emotional and social needs.

Moreover, the drawings depicting groups or pairs suggest that the underlying motivation for social integration is to ensure a sense of security. But they also show how little kids understand that such a sense of security can only be produced by a confluence of factors. The study thus highlights not only the instrumental but also the emotional significance of social support in children's lives, which has a major impact on their well-being, motivation, and school engagement. The findings support Vygotsky's theoretical perspectives on the role of social interaction in learning and development, confirming this effect. It is demonstrated that fostering a warm and supportive educational environment can play a crucial role in the social, emotional, and educational development of young students.

The study presents several important limitations that must be acknowledged to properly understand the value and applicability of its findings. Specifically, the small number of participants and the homogeneity of the sample, drawn from a single educational context, limit the generalisability of the conclusions. Additionally, the interpretation of the drawings involves an inevitable degree of subjectivity, even though it was guided by references from the specialised literature. The absence of complementary methods, such as interviews with parents and teachers or direct observations, further narrows the perspective on children's perceptions of social support. Moreover, the young age of the participants may influence their ability to express emotional and relational nuances through drawing, and the context in which the drawings were created (the child's mood, the physical environment) was not controlled. Furthermore, the study did not examine gender or class differences, factors that could have provided additional relevant insights. Therefore, the findings should be regarded as exploratory, offering valuable indications, but they cannot be considered universally applicable.

References

Barrera Jr, M., Sandler, I. N., & Ramsay, T. B. (1981). Preliminary development of a scale of social support: Studies on college students. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 9(4),* pp. 435-447.

Bowlby, J., & Solomon, M. (1989). Attachment theory. Los Angeles, CA: Lifespan Learning Institute.

Burkitt, E. (2004). Drawing conclusions from children's art. PSYCHOLOGIST-LEICESTER-, 17, pp. 566-569.

Coffman, D. L., & Gilligan, T. D. (2002). Social Support, Stress, and Self-Efficacy: Effects on Students' Satisfaction. Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 4(1), pp. 53–66. https://doi.org/10.2190/BV7X-F87X-2MXL-2B3L.

Clabaugh, G. K. (2010). The educational theory of Lev Vygotsky: A multi-dimensional analysis. *New Found, 1-18.*

Farokhi, M., & Hashemi, M. (2011). The Analysis of Children's Drawings: Social, Emotional, Physical, and Psychological aspects. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 30, pp. 2219–2224. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.10.433.

Hall, E. (2009). Mixed messages: the role and value of drawing in early education. International Journal of Early Years Education, 17(3), pp. 179–190. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760903424507.

Pathan, H., Memon, R. A., Memon, S., Khoso, A. R., & Bux, I. (2018). A critical review of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory in second language acquisition. *International Journal of English Linguistics, 8(4),* 232.

Rautanen, P., Soini, T., Pietarinen, J., & Pyhältö, K. (2020). Primary school students' perceived social support in relation to study engagement. European Journal of Psychology of Education, 36(3), pp. 653–672. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-020-00492-3.

Stewart, D., & Sun, J. (2004). How can we Build Resilience in Primary School Aged Children? The Importance of Social Support from Adults and Peers in Family, School and Community Settings. Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health, 16(1_suppl), 37–41. *doi:10.1177/101053950401600s10.*

Vedder, P., Boekaerts, M., & Seegers, G. (2005). Perceived Social Support and Well Being in School; The Role of Students' Ethnicity. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 34(3), pp. 269–278. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-005-4313-4.

Veteška, J., Svoboda, Z., Smolík, A., & Tirpák, J. (2020). Analysis of social support in pupils from different socio-cultural background as starting point for primary school teacher. *Adult Education,* pp. 235-244.