

TEACHER SOCIAL SUPPORT IN 4TH-5TH GRADE: COMPARING PUPIL AND TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This paper presents partial findings from an ongoing mixed-method study comparing two perspectives: how pupils perceive the social support provided by teachers, and how teachers reflect on their role as providers of this support. The broader research includes two developmental groups of pupils (grades 4–5 and 8–9), with this paper focusing on younger pupils aged 9–11 and their perceptions of teacher social support. The quantitative part uses the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS) and captures the perception of social support from teachers, parents, and peers. These data serve as a starting point for subsequent interpretation alongside the teacher perspective. The qualitative part is based on semi-structured interviews with teachers, which aim to understand how teachers interpret pupils' needs, how they view their own provision of support, and how they believe pupils perceive their support. When interpreted alongside the quantitative findings, the qualitative data enable a broader understanding of both perspectives and highlight possible points of convergence and divergence without directly comparing the two datasets. Qualitative data are analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theoretical framework of the project is Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model (2005), which allows both perspectives to be situated within the context of multi-level systems: the microsystem (immediate teacher-student interaction), mesosystem (links between school and family), exosystem (institutional conditions affecting teachers), and macrosystem (broader cultural and social norms associated with education). This framework makes it possible to identify how individual actors construct their understanding of social support and how their views differ or overlap. The study highlights the value of integrating both perspectives for understanding how supportive relationships are formed in schools and how pupil wellbeing and classroom climate can be meaningfully enhanced. The analysis also provides a basis for broader comparisons across levels of education. The findings may provide useful insights for future pedagogical practice, teacher training, and the development of support measures in schools.

Keywords: *Social support, pupil and teacher perspectives, thematic analysis, socio-ecological model.*

1. Introduction

Social support represents a key factor influencing pupils' academic achievement, well-being, and overall school adjustment (Malecki & Demaray, 2002). Within the school environment, teachers constitute one of the primary sources of support, shaping both the emotional climate and learning processes. Previous research has shown that perceived teacher support is associated with higher academic motivation, better classroom engagement, and more positive self-concept among pupils (Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Wentzel, 2010).

Despite the growing body of research, a gap remains in understanding how teacher support is perceived by pupils in comparison to how it is conceptualised and provided by teachers themselves. Most studies focus either on pupils' perceptions or teachers' practices, but rarely explore the relationship between these perspectives. Addressing this gap is essential, as the effectiveness of support may depend not only on what teachers provide but also on how pupils interpret and experience such support.

Social support in the school context is typically conceptualised as a multidimensional construct, including emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support (Malecki & Demaray, 2002). Among these, teacher support plays a particularly important role in early school years, when pupils rely on significant adults not only for academic guidance but also for emotional regulation and the development of a sense of belonging.

However, previous studies suggest that pupils' perceptions of support may differ from teachers' intentions, as support is interpreted through individual experiences, social context, and developmental factors. This highlights the importance of examining not only the provision of support, but also how it is perceived and understood by pupils.

This study aims to explore the convergence and divergence between pupils' perceptions of teacher support and teachers' reflections on providing support in primary education. The research focuses on pupils in grades 4 and 5 and employs a mixed-method design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches.

2. Design and methods

The study adopts a sequential mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which quantitative data serve as a starting point for further qualitative exploration. The qualitative phase was designed to interpret and contextualise the quantitative findings rather than to directly compare datasets.

2.1. Quantitative phase

The quantitative data were collected using the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS; Malecki et al., 2002), focusing specifically on the teacher support subscale. The sample consisted of pupils from grades 4 and 5 ($N = 328$ valid responses).

The results indicated a moderately high level of perceived teacher support ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.81$), with high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$). No statistically significant differences were found between grades or gender. However, item-level analysis revealed that relational and emotional aspects of support were rated higher than academic or instrumental forms of support.

2.2. Qualitative phase

The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with primary school teachers. The interview guide was constructed based on the quantitative findings, particularly focusing on areas where discrepancies were identified (e.g., academic support, individual differences, and perception of support).

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis focused on identifying key themes related to teachers' conceptualisation of support, strategies of providing support, and perceived challenges.

The interviews were conducted with teachers working at primary schools and were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The duration of the interviews ranged approximately between 20 and 50 minutes. The analysis followed the six-step approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), including familiarisation with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

To ensure credibility, the analysis focused on identifying patterns across participants while preserving the context of individual responses.

3. Results

The results section presents findings from both quantitative and qualitative phases of the study, followed by their integration. The quantitative results provide an overview of pupils' perceptions of teacher support, identifying key patterns and differences across dimensions. The qualitative findings offer deeper insight into how teachers conceptualise and provide support, as well as how they reflect on pupils' experiences. Rather than directly comparing the two datasets, the analysis focuses on identifying areas of convergence and divergence between these perspectives, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of teacher support in primary education.

3.1. Quantitative findings

Pupils perceived teacher support as generally positive and stable across demographic variables. The absence of differences between grades 4 and 5 suggests that perceived teacher support remains developmentally stable within this age group. Similarly, the lack of gender differences indicates that support is perceived relatively uniformly among boys and girls.

However, a more detailed analysis revealed an important pattern: pupils rated relational and emotional aspects of support more highly than academic or instructional support. This suggests that teachers are primarily perceived as providers of emotional safety and relational support rather than as sources of structured academic assistance.

At the same time, the variability in responses indicates that not all pupils experience teacher support equally, pointing to individual differences in perception.

3.2. Qualitative findings

The qualitative analysis revealed several interconnected themes reflecting how teachers conceptualise and provide support, as well as how they interpret pupils' needs and responses.

Support as a relational and emotional construct

Teachers consistently described support as a relational process based on trust, interest, and emotional availability. They emphasised the importance of creating a safe and supportive classroom climate in which pupils feel comfortable expressing themselves. As one teacher noted, *"the most important thing is that children feel safe and know they can trust you."*

Emotional support as a prerequisite for learning

Teachers frequently articulated the view that emotional well-being is a prerequisite for effective learning. According to their reflections, pupils' academic performance is closely linked to the quality of the teacher–pupil relationship. As one participant stated, *"without a good relationship, the learning simply does not work."*

Individualised and intuitive support

Support was described as highly individualised and often based on teachers' intuition and experience. Teachers reported adapting their approaches to the needs of individual pupils, including adjusting pace, providing additional explanations, or offering alternative forms of assistance.

This individualisation was not only related to academic performance, but also to pupils' emotional needs, social behaviour, and communication styles. Teachers emphasised the importance of knowing their pupils well in order to respond appropriately to their needs.

Limits of support

Teachers identified several constraints affecting their ability to provide support. These included time limitations, classroom heterogeneity, and systemic pressures related to curriculum demands and assessment. Additionally, the role of family background was highlighted as a significant factor influencing pupils' responsiveness to support.

Misalignment between provided and perceived support

A central theme was the recognition that support is not always perceived by pupils as intended. Teachers acknowledged that some pupils, particularly those with behavioural difficulties or lower motivation, may not interpret teachers' actions as supportive. As one teacher reflected, *"sometimes you try to help, but the child does not see it as support."*

This misalignment between provided and perceived support represents a key finding of the study and highlights the importance of considering pupils' subjective interpretations.

Social context of support

Teachers emphasised that pupils' perceptions of support are influenced by broader social factors, including peer relationships and family environment. These factors can mediate how support is interpreted and experienced.

In particular, teachers highlighted that peer dynamics and family background can significantly shape how support is perceived, suggesting that pupils' interpretations of support are influenced by factors beyond the immediate classroom interaction.

3.3. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings

The integration of findings reveals both convergence and divergence between pupils' perceptions and teachers' reflections.

Convergence was observed in the strong emphasis on relational and emotional support. Both pupils and teachers identified this dimension as central to the concept of support. Teachers' descriptions of building trust and ensuring emotional safety align with pupils' higher ratings of relational support.

However, divergence emerged in the domain of academic support. While teachers reported providing individualised instructional support, pupils rated this dimension lower. Qualitative findings suggest that this discrepancy may be explained by structural constraints, differences in interpretation, and variability in pupils' ability to recognise support.

Furthermore, teachers' reflections indicate that support is embedded in a broader social and contextual framework, which may influence how it is perceived by pupils. These findings suggest that teacher support is not only a matter of provision, but also of perception, interpretation, and context.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight both convergence and divergence between pupils' perceptions of teacher support and teachers' reflections on providing support. While relational aspects of support were consistently emphasised in both datasets, differences emerged particularly in the domain of academic support and its perception. These differences suggest that the effectiveness of support cannot be understood solely in terms of its provision, but also in relation to how it is interpreted by pupils.

The results indicate that teacher support should be understood not as a fixed set of practices, but as a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by interactions across multiple ecological levels. This perspective shifts the focus from individual teacher behaviour to a broader understanding of support as a relational and systemic phenomenon embedded in everyday school interactions.

At the microsystem level, teacher–pupil interactions play a central role. The findings highlight the importance of relational support as a key component of the microsystem, contributing to pupils' sense of safety, trust, and engagement. Teachers' emphasis on building relationships and creating a supportive classroom climate corresponds with pupils' higher ratings of relational and emotional support.

At the mesosystem level, the influence of family and peer relationships becomes evident. Teachers reported that pupils' perceptions of support are shaped by their home environment and social interactions, suggesting that support is co-constructed across contexts rather than limited to the classroom. This highlights the importance of considering the interconnected nature of pupils' social environments.

At the exosystem level, institutional factors such as time constraints, curriculum demands, and school organisation significantly affect teachers' ability to provide individualised support. These structural conditions create a tension between teachers' intentions to support pupils and the practical realities of the classroom, particularly in the domain of academic support, where pupils' ratings were lower.

At the macrosystem level, broader educational values and norms influence how support is conceptualised and prioritised. The strong emphasis on relational support observed in both datasets suggests a shift towards a more holistic understanding of education, where emotional well-being is considered an essential component of learning rather than a secondary aspect.

Overall, the study demonstrates that teacher support is not a uniform construct, but a complex and multi-layered phenomenon shaped by interactions across ecological levels. Importantly, the findings also highlight that support is not only a matter of what teachers provide, but also how it is perceived, interpreted, and experienced by pupils within their social and contextual environments.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that while teacher support is generally perceived positively by pupils, its interpretation varies depending on the type of support and contextual factors. The findings reveal a strong convergence in the importance of relational support but also a divergence in the perception of academic support.

The results suggest that effective support in education requires not only providing assistance but also ensuring that it is recognised and meaningful from the pupil's perspective. Future research should further explore the mechanisms through which support is perceived and how it can be aligned with pupils' needs.

The study contributes to a deeper understanding of teacher support as a multi-layered and interpretative process rather than a purely behavioural construct.

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