

PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT IN HIGH-ABILITY, LEARNING DISABILITIES AND REGULAR STUDENTS: THREE GROUP COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Family, peers, and teachers constitute core developmental contexts that shape adolescents' adjustment and wellbeing. Previous research has shown consistent associations between perceived social support and students' academic and psychological outcomes. However, little is known about whether these perceptions differ across the diverse learner profiles typically found in secondary education. This study examines perceived social support among three groups of Spanish secondary students: regular students, students with learning disabilities, and high-ability students, for a total of 183 participants. Perceived support was assessed using three subscales from the Spanish version of the Relational Support Inventory-Adolescence (RSI-A), which measures perceived emotional support, guidance, and reassurance of worth from family, peers, and teachers. Most sources and types of support showed no significant differences across groups. However, two teacher-related dimensions revealed meaningful variation: high-ability students reported higher perceived emotional support from teachers and greater perceived reassurance of worth from teachers compared with both regular students and students with learning disabilities. These findings highlight teachers as a differentiated source of support across student groups and underscore the importance of considering learner characteristics when evaluating perceived support in school settings.

Keywords: *Perceived social support, secondary students, high ability, learning disabilities, comparative analysis.*

1. Introduction

Perceived social support is supposed to include perceived availability of different types of resources that would contribute to the degree to which individuals' basic psychological needs (relatedness, competence and autonomy) are satisfied. Based on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and the self-system model of motivational development (Connell & Wellborn, 1991), the provision of *emotional support* (displayed as attention, warmth, and caring) would satisfy the need for *relatedness*, making the individual feel appreciated, loved, and connected to significant others and conferring confidence to the individual. The provision of *guidance* (manifested in offering clear and consistent rules, guidelines, expectations, and rationales) is assumed to satisfy the need for *competence*, encouraging the individual's sense of agency and effectiveness. Finally, the provision of *reassurance of worth* (in the sense of facilitating open exchange of opinions and views, acting empathically, offering choices to meet the previously defined rules, and minimizing the use of controlling techniques) is expected to satisfy students' need for *autonomy*, ultimately fostering a sense of volition and ownership and laying the foundations for autonomous self-regulation of motivation.

Support provisions have been related with different indexes of academic adjustment and achievement (Tinajero et al., 2020) as well as with self-regulated learning (Martínez-López et al., 2023). In light of the differences observed in these indices among individuals with varying learning potential (Almukhambetova & Hernández-Torrano, 2020; Parpottas et al., 2023), it is reasonable to consider, from a systemic perspective, the role that perceived social support plays in these differences. However, to date, this issue has received little attention from researchers. A study by Martínez (2006) found significant differences in perceived social support from parents, peers, and teachers among secondary school students with and without learning disabilities. We have not found any studies on the relationship between giftedness

and social support. Given the gaps identified in research on differences on perceived social support in function of learning potential, the following research question was formulated for the present study: Are there differences between regular students (RS), high-ability students (HAS) and students with learning disabilities (SWLD) in terms of their perception of social support?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The study involved 183 Spanish secondary school students (36% female), aged 12–16 years. The sample comprised RS (36.6%), SWLD (32.2%), and HAS (31.2%). SWLD were identified based on self-reported reception of educational support at their schools due to specific education needs. (HAS) were recruited through an extracurricular enrichment program for adolescents with high mathematical talent.

2.2. Measures

The perceived support provisions from family, peers and teachers were assessed using three subscales from the Spanish version of the Relational Support Inventory-Adolescence (RSI-A, Musitu et al., 2001). These subscales allowed scores related to the individual's appreciation of the availability of emotional support to be obtained, guidance, and reassurance of worth. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the support sources subscales ranged between .86 and .92.

2.3. Procedure

Data were collected during the second trimester of the 2022/2023 academic year, following approval from the Bioethics Committee of the University of Santiago de Compostela (protocol code: 29/2020). Written informed consent was obtained from all students and their families prior to participation. Questionnaires were administered collectively in the classroom, and participation was voluntary, anonymous, and uncompensated.

3. Results

Group differences were examined using the Kruskal–Wallis test, followed by post hoc pairwise comparisons. Effect size was estimated using epsilon squared (ϵ^2). Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics by Group. Kruskal–Wallis Test Results and Significant Post-hoc Comparisons.

	RS	SWLD	HAS	<i>H</i> (2)	ϵ^2	Group Comparison
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)			
PSS-Em-F	4.04 (0.84)	4.07 (0.77)	4.28 (0.59)	2.174	.001	
PSS-Gu-F	4.03 (0.82)	4.00 (0.67)	4.15 (0.56)	1.268	.000	
PSS-Rw-F	3.74 (0.81)	3.57 (0.75)	3.78 (0.71)	3.193	.007	
PSS-Em-P	3.63 (0.64)	3.55 (0.67)	3.69 (0.82)	2.183	.001	
PSS-Gu-P	3.63 (0.63)	3.67 (0.59)	3.66 (0.71)	1.011	.000	
PSS-Rw-P	3.88 (0.56)	3.78 (0.51)	3.88 (0.58)	2.618	.003	
PSS-Em-T	3.06 (0.79)	3.19 (0.76)	3.53 (0.65)	11.784**	.054	HAS > RS**, HAS > SWLD*
PSS-Gu-T	3.39 (0.73)	3.44 (0.60)	3.48 (0.57)	0.431	.000	
PSS-Rw-T	2.92 (0.79)	2.90 (0.78)	3.29 (0.63)	8.282*	.035	HAS > SWLD*

Note. PSS= perceived social support. Em= emotional. Gu= guidance. RW= reassurance of worth. F= family. P= peers. T= teachers. RS= regular students. SWLD= students with learning disabilities. HAS= high-ability students. *H*(2) = Kruskal–Wallis *H* statistic with 2 degrees of freedom. ϵ^2 = epsilon squared effect size for the Kruskal–Wallis test. Negative values were truncated to zero.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

4. Discussion

Results of the present study indicate that HAS perceived greater emotional support and reassurance of worth from teachers than their peers, whereas no group differences emerged for perceived support from family and peers. Perceived social support is a relatively stable sense that the individual is valued and will be assisted by others if necessary, that is forged in life experiences with significant others (family, peers and teachers) (Cutrona & Russell, 1987). Families are expected to display high levels of availability, responsiveness, and unconditional support and to adapt to their children's needs (Kobak et al., 2007), which may explain the absence of group differences in perceived family support. Regarding peers' support it may be conditioned by behavioural homophily, that is the tendency of individuals to interact more frequently with others who share similar educational or developmental profiles (Palacios et al., 2024), resulting in

comparable levels of perceived peer support across groups. In contrast, differences in teacher support appear to be more salient to students. Both HAS and SWLD are considered eligible for specific educational measures, and the implementation of such measures is often visible in classroom contexts (Krämer et al., 2021; Rutigliano et al., 2021). Our findings suggest that SWLD may perceive teacher support as similar to that received by their classmates, whereas HAS perceive greater emotional support and reassurance of worth. This pattern may reflect a reciprocal process, whereby higher engagement among HAS elicits increased teacher support (Chen et al., 2025).

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