The Impact of Social Support on Youth Education

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Original Article

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Abstract:

Social support is crucial in shaping youth education, affecting academic performance, emotional well-being, and resilience. This article examines the role of family, peers, teachers, and the community in providing support. It explores different forms of social support—emotional, informational, and material—and presents findings from qualitative research with secondary school students. The study shows that strong social support is linked to better academic outcomes, higher motivation, and reduced stress. It also highlights the lack of support in schools and the need for stronger collaboration between

families and schools. The article concludes with recommendations for educators, parents, and policymakers to strengthen social connections for improved educational experiences.

Research Method and Study Rationale

The questionnaire survey was carried out using google tools and excel processing of the obtained results. The survey involved 110 respondents who sent answers to all the questions. They were mostly students from the selected school and their sports teammates and friends. Almost 50% of the total population involved were females. The questions in the questionnaire were formulated based on the four-dimensional House model of social support. The four dimensions of social support according to House (1981) are:

- Informational support: the provision of advice, information, or guidance to help solve problems.
- Values support sharing and reinforcing values, beliefs, and attitudes that promote self-esteem and self-worth.
- Emotional support: includes expressions of empathy, love, trust and care.
- Instrumental support: providing practical help or resources, such as financial or task assistance. This model is often used in psychology and sociology to understand different aspects of social support and its impact on people's mental and physical health; we consider it relevant to the subject of our research in an institutional setting.

In our research, we were interested in the role that parents, coaches, friends/peers, and educators play in these domains. We scaled responses into 4 levels: not at all, rarely, often, constantly. The wording of each question was designed to elicit an overall view of the quality of provision of the basic parameters of social support according to the model in question. We will consider the weakest indicators in the different dimensions of social support as an area to be strategically entered in future pedagogical practice. This is where we see the possibility of innovative application of educators who, in addition to their professional portfolio, can contribute to improving the quality of social support and thus to improving the sport performance of pupils. The role of parents, friends and coaches is more peripheral to the aims of this thesis. We see their place within the social support framework mainly in terms of improving synergy, with the educator becoming the catalyst for the necessary changes.

We are also aware of the weaknesses of our research in the following respects, for example:

- research areas were not specified separately for sport and academic outcomes;
- we did not apply higher order statistical methods of analysis to the results obtained;
- the statistical sample size of 100 represents more indicative potential than statistical significance;
- the questions in the questionnaire could have had more extensive structuring and greater fineness of scaling;
- we did not test any hypotheses specific to the school setting.

Nevertheless, we consider the statistical set of 100 to be a sufficient reference source to make an initial exploration of the issue and a first approximation of practical applications as a result of the data collected. We have not been able to access a similar survey within the Slovak provenance, thus the comparison of our results was limited only to general findings presented in relevant literature from abroad.

Introduction

The concept of social support has gained significant attention across various scientific disciplines in recent decades. Initially introduced by Sidney Cobb in 1976 in his seminal work, *"Social Support as a Moderator of Life Stress,"* Cobb laid the theoretical foundations for understanding how social ties and interactions impact mental and physical health, highlighting social support as a protective factor against stress. (1) This concept is now widely recognized in fields such as sports, medicine, sociology, psychology, and education.

In recent years, the role of social support in the development of young athletes has emerged

as a key topic in sport psychology and pedagogy. This shift is partly driven by the increasing psychological and emotional pressures faced by today's youth, stemming from factors like the fast-paced nature of modern life, information overload, media saturation, post-COVID shifts in social dynamics, and the rise of online education. Consequently, psychological challenges among primary and secondary school students, as well as higher education students, are becoming more prevalent, as confirmed by both national and international studies (2). These changes emphasize the need for educational systems to integrate comprehensive support for students, addressing not only their cognitive and behavioral development but also their social, moral, and spiritual growth.

Within pedagogy and psychology, social support plays a vital role in shaping the psychological and academic progress of students. While much research has been dedicated to the general influence of social support, the specific mechanisms through which educators impact students remain relatively underexplored (3). Educators, due to their significant role in students' lives, often influence their social and emotional development, sometimes unconsciously, making their support crucial during the formative years. This role has become even more prominent in the wake of the psychological and sociological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (4).

Definition of Social Support

Since this subject of scientific research originally appeared in Anglo-Saxon provenance, Slovak literature is dependent on translations of foreign terms, which can be quite confusing (5). It is necessary to distinguish between the interrelated terms *social support* and *social integration*. Although both terms are related to the extent to which individuals are integrated into society and the collective, and to their ability to take on responsibilities in the context of belonging and building relationships in the community of which they are part, there is a fundamental difference between them. This lies in the point of view and in the causal factors. *Social integration* relates more to the structure and extent of social relationships and the frequency of the variety of their interactions; *social support* relates to the type of function of these relationships, their quality, and this in primary regard to the inner world of the person who is socially integrated. While it is true that both - social integration and social support - are interrelated, because it is only through existing social ties and interactions that the attainability of social support is realistic, it is social support that becomes the engine of progress and development of social interactions within social integration (6). It is evident that the quality of a person determines the quality of the relationships he or she creates or becomes part of. Given that humans are intricate entities, and their internal experiences cannot be easily delineated or fully captured, it is understandable that multiple definitions of social support exist. For the purposes of this thesis, we present three such definitions.

Cohen and Wills' definition is based on their stress buffering model, in which they defined social support as "resources obtained through social relationships that help individuals cope with stress and increase their ability to adapt to life changes" (7). Both authors believe that high quality and relevant social support can reduce the negative effects of stress by providing emotional and practical support. This definition is very clear and clearly highlights the role of social support in the context of coping with stress and adaptation to change. Particularly in the post-pandemic C-19 period, the importance of social support in different social contexts has increased in importance (8).

Another definition of social support, according to Thoits, is based on the direct effects model, with particular emphasis on "the process by which social relationships provide the emotional, informational, material, and other problem-solving tools needed to cope with stress" (9). This definition focuses on the process aspect of social support and emphasises its dynamic nature. It identifies similar types of support (emotional, informational, material) and their role in coping with stress, making it a comprehensive tool for understanding different forms of support. According to this model, social support has a direct positive impact on an individual's well-being, independent of the presence of stressful situations. Understood in this way, regular social sup-

port leads to higher levels of self-esteem, motivation and overall satisfaction.

House's (1981) definition of social support is "a resource provided through interactions that helps individuals deal with stressful situations" (10). By social support he meant all appropriate and corresponding means and resources provided through interactions with others that help individuals deal with their stressful situations. According to him, social support includes emotional, informational and instrumental support. This definition is practical and concrete because it classifies social support into four understandable categories (emotional, material, informational, and appreciative support). It is suitable for applications in a variety of fields, including work stress, because it clearly distinguishes types of support that can be easily identified and measured. Its clarity makes it useful for both research and applied practice, for example in health or social work. On the other hand, although the definition focuses on specific types of social support, it may be overly simplistic, which runs some risk of reductionism. With this in mind, we have based our research on this paradigm of social support.

A recent comprehensive comparative study (11) highlights that social support comprises a multifaceted array of factors affecting an individual's capacity to handle life's difficulties. These factors are influenced by a network of diverse inputs within social interactions, and as such, there is currently no universally agreed-upon definition of social support. This research explored the impact of a hierarchical model of social support (family, friends, and teachers) concerning various types of social support (emotional, material, informational) and examined the correlation between perceived social support and actual social support. The researchers discovered that robust social support networks greatly enhance adolescents' resilience to stress and life's challenges, resulting in improved psychological well-being and higher academic performance. In the context of contemporary society, characterised by a pervasive sense of self-preoccupation (12), the issue of social support assumes paramount importance. This is not only due to the escalating prevalence of psychological distress among students but also considering concerns regarding the deleterious effects of digital technologies and the dissemination of "fake news" online, and "the potential influence on recipients' behaviour within the digital environment" (13).

Study Results and Analysis

From the extensive results obtained in our survey, we present the most relevant ones to the topic.

Figure 1 Information support sources rate

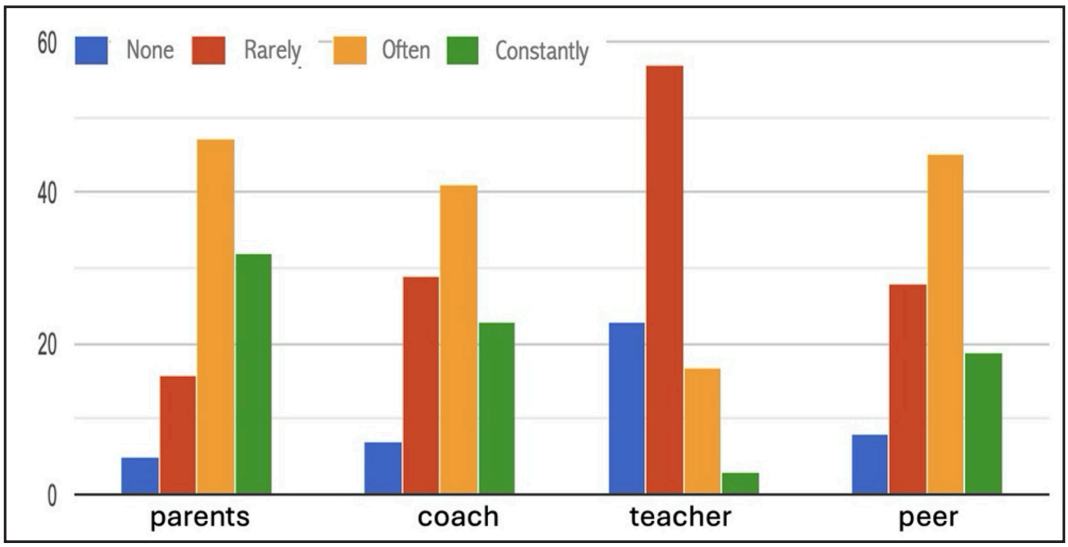


Figure 2 Sources of social support pertaining to the quality of self-esteem

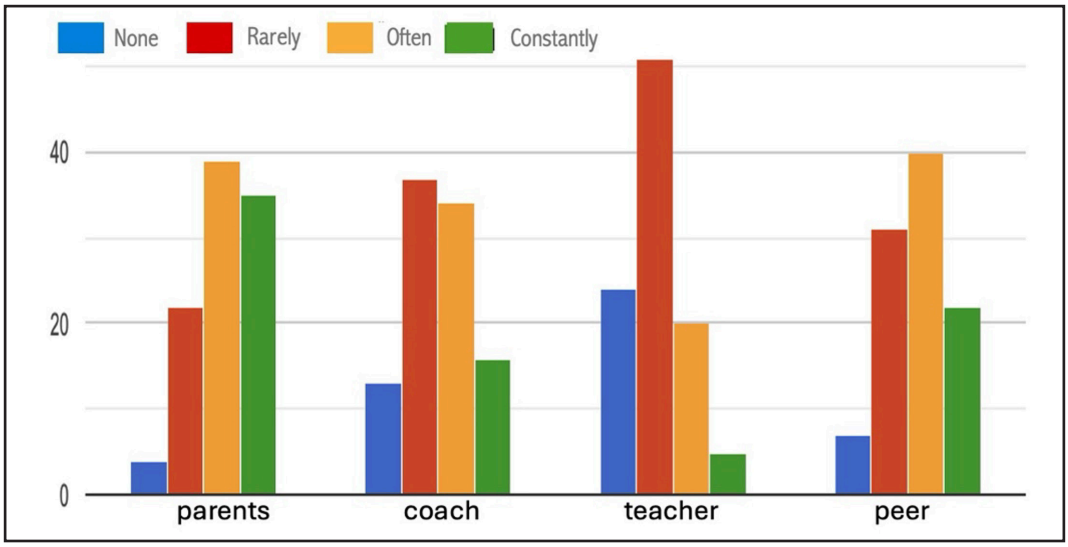


Figure 3 Emotional support – an assessment of the quality of various sources

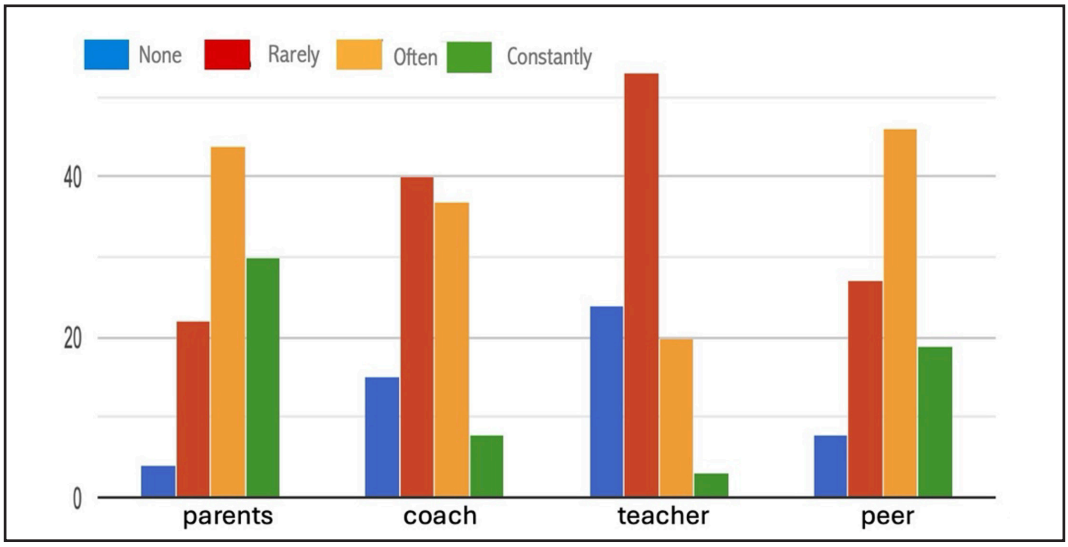
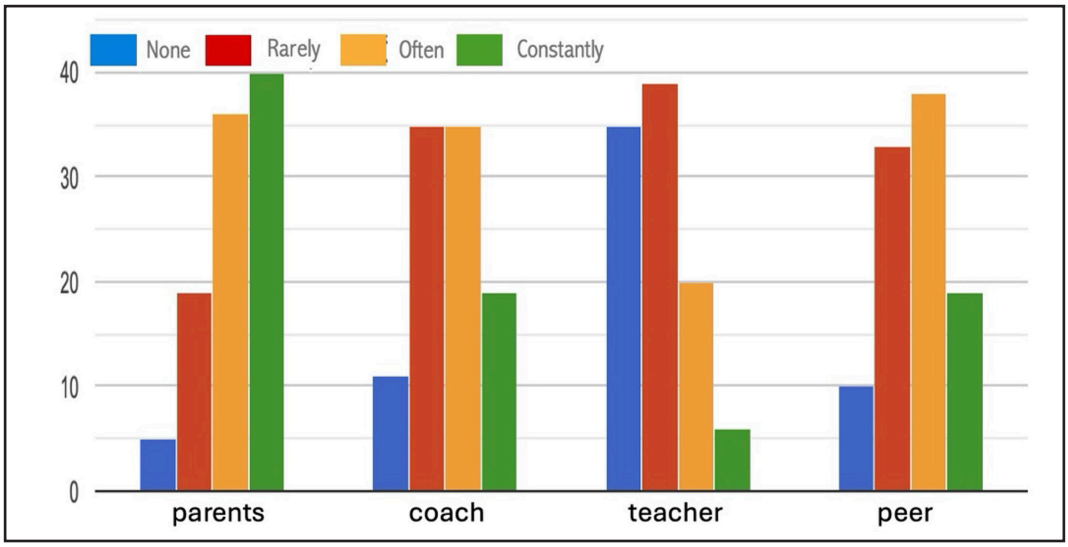


Figure one of the survey results reveals that the family is the leading source of information support, with the coach, teammates, and teachers following in that order, with teachers having the least influence. This could be attributed to the ambiguity surrounding the term "information support," whether it refers to information specific to the sporting interest or general tools needed for achieving goals, such as academic goals and outcomes in the educator's context. The research emphasizes the need to bolster the educator's role and capabilities in the life of a young student who might experience varying degrees of information support absence.

As shown in Figure two, the findings reveal that the family of the student/athlete is the most significant factor in developing healthy self-esteem. In contrast, educators have the least positive influence on social support. It is noteworthy that respondents considered their coaches to be less important to their self-worth than their teammates. This finding requires further explo-

Figure 4 Instrumental support – resource efficiency



ration to determine the causes. One possible explanation is the poor communication skills of coaches in building self-esteem. Nonetheless, the importance of classmates and peers in social support is recognized.

Figure 3's analysis demonstrates that teachers are perceived as providing the least emotional support, with coaches, teammates, and family ranking next in line. The negative aspects tied to educators are acknowledged. These results emphasize the necessity and urgency of addressing social support. Educators should not allow the quest for academic success to obstruct their capacity to provide emotional support like that of a coach. The expectations for educators are especially high when student-athletes are less driven to excel academically. Students who prioritize sports often exhibit less interest in academics, as seen in schools. This could lead to a diminished need for emotional support. However, students seeking academic enhancement may need emotional support and encouragement from their teachers.

Figure 4 reveals that the family is the most crucial source of instrumental support among those studied. This aligns with the respondents' age group, indicating their financial and practical reliance on their families. Surprisingly, teammates received higher ratings for instrumental support than coaching practices in this area. Teachers had the lowest ratings. This calls for further research to uncover the context and causes of this situation and to suggest possible areas for pedagogical changes to improve the results. While educators have minimal ability to directly influence the coach-parent relationship, they can initiate meetings and activities within their primary role that strengthen the parent-coach-educator triad and modify their teaching methods to enhance social support.

Effective strategies for educators

Drawing from the analysis of theoretical insights and empirical data in our study, we can propose several actionable suggestions for educators that may enhance the psychological and performance growth of students or young athletes.

1. Providing steady emotional support

Emotional support can include simple acts of empathy and caring, such as personal conversations where teachers actively listen and show that they care about the students' feelings and experiences. For example, after difficult tests or competitions, a teacher can provide individual feedback that includes not only technical aspects but also emotional support. This approach can include praise for effort and effort, even if the results were not ideal, and encouragement to

improve in the future. Regular encouragement and positive reinforcement are other important aspects of emotional support. Educators can use motivational phrases, recognition of achievements and encouragement before and after competitions to help athletes maintain high levels of motivation. An example would be the use of motivational bulletin boards in training facilities where individual or team achievements are posted, which promotes a positive atmosphere and team spirit.

Educators can also work to create an overall supportive environment where students feel safe and valued (14). This may include organizing team-building activities, social events outside of practices, and regular team meetings where progress, goals, and challenges are discussed. Such activities promote team cohesion and allow students to build strong relationships with each other which will create a supportive environment for their individual development and growth (15). The dynamics of emotional support depend not only on the individual teacher's approach to the student but also on how he or she can establish a collective modus operandi where there is a synergy of positive emotional support stimuli among the individual members of the classroom collective. Empathy, encouragement, positive reinforcement, and fostering a supportive and relationally creative environment are crucial elements that coaches and educators should consciously incorporate into their methods (16). This approach enables them to effectively assist students in achieving their full potential while cultivating a positive and inspiring atmosphere.

2. Fostering a positive team environment

One of the primary educational challenges in fostering a positive team environment is ensuring that every team member feels significant and appreciated (17). Teachers must strive to create an inclusive setting where every voice is acknowledged, and every contribution is respected. This can be difficult, particularly in classrooms with diverse backgrounds and personalities.

Another challenge is managing conflicts and misunderstandings among students in the classroom. Teachers need to be equipped to resolve issues swiftly and effectively to prevent conflicts from escalating and disrupting team dynamics. This involves the ability to engage in open and honest conversations, offer constructive criticism, and reach compromises acceptable to all involved. However, a fundamental requirement for success is that the teacher is well-acquainted with their students and maintains a personal connection with them, which goes beyond merely meeting the educational goals of the school curriculum (18).

Practical tips for fostering a team environment:

- Team-building exercises: planning team-building exercises, like group outings, sports events, or theatre visits, can enhance connections among team members and encourage collaboration.
- Unified objectives and principles: Establishing shared objectives and principles that all team members endorse can contribute to a sense of solidarity and emotional safety.
- Transparent communication: Promoting transparent communication within the team, where each member can openly share their ideas and emotions, aids in avoiding misunderstandings and builds trust, which is essential for emotional backing.
- Consistent team gatherings: organizing consistent team gatherings to review progress, setbacks, obstacles, and strategies can ensure all members are aligned and reinforce team unity

3. Efficient conflict resolution

As today's youth struggles with relational conflicts, educators must adeptly manage disputes and issues that may occur between themselves and students, as well as among students. This entails transparent communication, empathetic listening, and collaborative problem-solving (19). Conflicts may emerge due to various factors, such as differing expectations, misunderstandings, and personal differences.

Resolving conflicts effectively is crucial for sustaining a positive and productive teacher-student relationship. According to Hellison (20), effective conflict resolution "involves open communication, empathetic listening, and finding

common solutions." Educators who can address conflicts constructively can enhance their rapport with students and foster an environment where everyone feels valued and supported. This lays the groundwork for delivering effective social support.

Educators must ensure that learners comprehend they can freely express their thoughts and feelings without fear of their grades being impacted. This includes organizing frequent meetings where students can express their worries, recommendations, or any other input related to school and classroom activities. Numerous studies (21) have demonstrated that open communication reduces conflict and strengthens team cohesion.

Offering students opportunities to cultivate leadership skills serves as an effective tool for conflict prevention. This may involve assigning tasks, responsibilities, and guiding team projects or subtasks (22). Cultivating leadership skills enhances student confidence and participation, fostering a supportive peer environment. Likewise, Kouzes and Posner's research endorses the notion that nurturing leadership skills boosts team dynamics and overall performance (23). Such an environment is suitable for delivering social support that operates not only vertically (teacher-student) but also horizontally (student-student).

Conclusion

Society is shifting and culture is perpetually evolving. Digital technologies are significantly transforming the young generation's awareness and emotional sphere, including their ability to interact socially (24). In the last five years, there has been a substantial increase in mental health issues among young people. Statistics reveal that the number of children and young people diagnosed with mental disorders has risen by more than 70%. This increase has been driven by several factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, which has greatly exacerbated the mental health of this age group (25). Children and young people experienced increased stress, isolation, educational interruptions, bullying, and family issues, which contributed to the decline in their mental health. The present-day digital age, characterised by an abundance of entertainment and media, is observed to be contributing to a decline in critical thinking skills, particularly among younger demographics (26). This phenomenon underscores the imperative for a resurgence of "metaphysical components within educational curricula"(27) and the moral development of young individuals.

Based on the findings of our theoretical and empirical research:

1. Social support alleviates stress. Social support, particularly emotional and informational support, can greatly alleviate stress and anxiety levels among students. Our research indicated a deficiency in emotional and informational support from educators.

2. Direct impact of social support. According to Thoits' direct effects model, social support has a direct positive impact on students' self-esteem and motivation. Appreciative support, which includes acknowledgment and praise, can enhance students' intrinsic motivation and inspire them to strive for performance improvement. Our research uncovered a lack of interest in students' inner world within the school environment and inadequate inspirational guidance from educators regarding students' career prospects.

3. The ecological aspect of social support. The present study is rooted in the theoretical framework of House's model, which has been instrumental in highlighting the pivotal role of diverse environmental layers in shaping individual development. The findings underscore the significance of not only direct interactions between educators and students, but also the broader contexts of family, peer, and school environments play a crucial role in the holistic development of students. The primary role of family and peers in providing social support to respondents was confirmed in the present study. Concurrently, the results aligned with the understanding that social support is a multi-layered phenomenon, the mechanism of which remains unexplained for us and thus continues to be a subject for further research.

4. Practical applications of the theoretical models: the proposed integration of theoretical findings into practice suggests that edu-

cators should more actively offer emotional and informational support, adopt an individualized approach, cultivate positive relationships and a team atmosphere, resolve conflicts effectively, and support the long-term development and career planning of their students. This is a complex challenge that extends beyond the scope and capabilities of this paper and highlights fundamental issues related to the quality of our educational system and the competence of coaches and educators themselves.

We believe that our theoretical and empirical research has contributed to a better understanding of the theoretical models and frameworks in sport psychology and pedagogy and has provided inspirational insights into the professional discourse on the importance of social support for the school environment. The identification of key factors and mechanisms of social support may provide a foundation for further empirical studies and research, which may extend the existing literature and lead to new discoveries and insights in this area. The goal, however, is the development of the person and his or her ability to socialize in a way that seeks not only his or her own benefit (28).

The performance of Slovak students in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) over recent years shows stagnation or a slight decline in educational quality. Students score below average in literacy, mathematics, and science compared to other OECD countries. This trend highlights the necessity for fundamental changes in the education system, such as modernizing curricula, supporting teachers, and enhancing student motivation. Enhancing the quality of teaching and the efficiency of the educational process is crucial for improved competitiveness (29,30). The findings of this work strongly support our conviction that healthy transformational change in our education system must encompass the implementation of social support in all its aspects (31,32,33).

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