



Post-Pandemic Perspectives: Primary School Children's Views of School Through the Lens of Attachment Theory

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Abstract

This study investigates the changes in primary school students' perceptions of their school, teachers, and school administrators during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employs metaphors as a methodological tool to investigate alterations in primary school children's perceptions, framed through the lens of attachment theory. The research centers on two primary questions: first, it explores how primary school students metaphorically perceive the school; second, it examines how they metaphorically perceive school members, including principals, vice principals, and teachers. The participants included 137 fourth-grade students who were studied during the 2020-2021 education year. The research was qualitative in design. Data were collected using structured questionnaires. The data were analysed and interpreted within an attachment theory framework using qualitative methods. Analysis revealed that some students' perceptions had changed, while others had remained the same. The findings suggested that primary school students' perceptions and understanding of school leadership may have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the results showed that the underlying relationships between pupils and teachers were resilient to the disturbances caused by the pandemic.

Key Words

Attachment theory
COVID-19
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About Article

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Introduction

Pandemics and epidemics have historically triggered significant social and historical changes. The COVID-19 pandemic represented a novel form of trauma with far-reaching neuropsychiatric, economic, and mortality consequences. As such, this trauma affected essential educational outcomes and various aspects of the school experience (Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2016; Kira et al., 2023). Therefore, as Garmy et al. (2022) pointed out understanding how the pandemic has affected students' perceptions of school and school staff has become an issue.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted primary school students globally, leading to disruptions in their education and mental health. School closures, implemented to control the spread of the virus, have affected over 80% of children worldwide (Maharjan & Devkota, 2022). These closures have resulted in interruptions in learning for more than 1 billion children (Hanno et al., 2022). The sudden shift to remote, hybrid, or in-person learning formats has presented challenges for many students (Hanno et al., 2022). In addition to academic challenges, school closures and the shift to distance learning have deprived children of important social interactions, which can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness (Nagakumar et al., 2021).

Children's socio-emotional well-being is critical to their academic success, and attachment is fundamental to their socio-emotional well-being (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). The attachment styles established in the physical classroom environment have been attempted to be maintained through digital interactions. However, the relationship between teacher and student, and therefore student and school, has changed with distance learning. This transition, combined with the uncertainties surrounding the pandemic, has created a new form of trauma for children (Ma et al., 2021).

As scholars (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin 2020) have emphasised, the transition to distance learning and reduced social interactions have strained attachment relationships, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to address students' attachment needs. In addition, understanding how students feel about school during these challenging times can help policymakers, educators, and families make informed decisions to effectively support students' academic achievement, social and emotional well-being, and overall school experience (Yang et al., 2022). It is therefore imperative to ascertain whether secure attachment relationships were maintained during the pandemic, to facilitate students' healthy development in the post-pandemic era and to develop strategies for coping with possible future epidemics.

Overall, the research indicates that attachment theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex interplay between attachment relationships and primary students' well-being. As a result, attachment theory provides an important framework for understanding the emotional and social needs of primary school students and providing appropriate support.

Vural et al. (2022) discovered that students' metaphors related to the pandemic reflected the significant impact of the pandemic on students' perceptions of their school environment. Therefore, this study uses metaphors to determine whether primary school children's perceptions of school and school staff changed during the pandemic. The study focuses on the following research questions:

1. How do primary school students metaphorically perceive school within the framework of attachment theory?
2. How do primary school students metaphorically perceive school members (principals, vice principal, and teachers) within the framework of attachment theory?

Theoretical Background

Attachment theory

This study is based on the fundamental framework of attachment theory, originally developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth (1991). The theory posits that the emotional bonds formed between infants and their primary caregivers are crucial for the child's psychological development and future relational patterns. Bowlby (1977) emphasized that these early attachments serve as a prototype for all subsequent

relationships throughout an individual's life, influencing emotional regulation, social competence, and interpersonal dynamics (Howe et al., 1999; Xu, 2022). The theory suggests that when children experience consistent and sensitive caregiving, they develop a secure attachment style, which fosters a sense of safety and encourages exploration of their environment (Ainsworth, 1989; Mesman, Minter, Angnged, Cissé, Salali & Migliano, 2018). Conversely, inconsistent or neglectful caregiving can lead to insecure attachment styles, which may manifest as anxiety, avoidance, or ambivalence in adult relationships (Genuis, 1994; Harms, 2011).

According to the theory, attachment styles refer to the patterns of expectations, needs, and interactions that individuals develop in their relationships, primarily based on their early experiences with caregivers. These styles are categorized into four main types: secure, anxious, avoidant, and fearful attachment styles. Each style reflects different approaches to intimacy, trust, and emotional regulation in relationships (Bülow, 2023; Darban, Safarzai, Koohsari & Kordi, 2020; Karna & Simon, 2024).

Individuals with a secure attachment style typically have positive views of themselves and others. They are comfortable with intimacy and are generally able to establish healthy, trusting relationships. Research indicates that secure attachment is associated with better emotional regulation and resilience, leading to higher overall life satisfaction (Bülow, 2023; Darban et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021). Secure individuals are more likely to seek support from others and maintain stable relationships, which contributes to their psychological well-being (Najafabadi, 2020). Anxiously attached individuals often have a heightened sensitivity to their partner's emotional states and may exhibit clinginess or dependency. They tend to worry about their partner's availability and may fear abandonment. This attachment style is linked to lower self-esteem and difficulties in emotional regulation, which can lead to relationship conflicts and dissatisfaction (Darban et al., 2020; Leary & Hoyle, 2009; Karna & Simon, 2024; Kim et al., 2021). Anxious individuals may also engage in maladaptive coping strategies, such as excessive reassurance-seeking, which can strain their relationships (Kim & Miller, 2020). Those with an avoidant attachment style often prioritize independence and self-sufficiency, leading them to distance themselves emotionally from others. They may struggle with intimacy and have a tendency to suppress their emotions. This style is associated with a lack of trust in others and a reluctance to rely on anyone, which can hinder the development of close relationships (Choi & Min, 2019; Karna & Simon, 2024; Martins Mendonca, Lasenby-Lessard & Davies, 2024). Finally, fearful attachment is characterized by a combination of anxiety and avoidance. Individuals with this style desire closeness but simultaneously fear it, leading to a push-pull dynamic in relationships. They often have a negative view of themselves and others, which can result from traumatic experiences in childhood. This attachment style is associated with significant challenges in emotional regulation and relationship stability (Karna & Simon, 2024; Kim et al., 2021). Fearful individuals may find it difficult to trust others, leading to isolation and loneliness (Maldar & Nayak, 2024).

Attachment theory has significant implications for education, particularly in basic education settings. These bonds influence children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, which are critical for their success in educational environments (Berlin, 2021; de Castro & Pereira, 2019). Understanding attachment theory allows educators to create supportive learning environments that cater to the emotional needs of students, thereby enhancing their academic performance and overall well-being (Parker & Levinson, 2018). This theory defines the affective quality of the relationship between teacher and child in primary schools. It examines three dimensions of the relationship: dependency, closeness, and conflict. From this perspective, closeness explores the degree to which the child sees the teacher as a safe haven. Dependence indicates that the child does not see the teacher as a safe base for exploration. Finally, conflict refers to resistance and disharmony in insecure caregiver-child interactions (Roorda, Zee & Koomen, 2021; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012).

The attachment relationships that students form with their teachers can significantly influence their school adjustment, relational well-being, and academic performance. Teachers who are perceived by students as close and supportive contribute to a positive learning environment that promotes students' emotional well-being and engagement in school. These close teacher and student relationships are consistent with the principles of attachment theory (Di Norcia et al., 2022), which emphasises the role of secure attachments in promoting the social and emotional development of the students.

Research has shown that the quality of attachments, particularly to teachers, is critical to students' emotional well-being and overall development (Spilt et al., 2011). Secure attachments to teachers are linked to positive outcomes for primary school students. These include increased resilience, emotional stability, and academic success. Secure attachments provide students with a sense of safety, trust, and support that is essential for their psychological growth and well-being. In addition to teacher-student relationships, the broader school climate and culture also play a role in shaping students' well-being (Milatz et al., 2015; Spence et al., 2022; Waaler et al., 2013). Therefore, secure attachments to caregivers and teachers are critical for providing a sense of safety and support, which in turn influences the primary school students' overall well-being and academic success.

The disruptions caused by the pandemic, such as changes in daily routines, separation from peers, and alterations in learning environments, have challenged students' attachments, potentially leading to feelings of insecurity and anxiety. Research (Song, Vicman & Doan, 2022) has also shown that changes in peer relationships have been linked to increased loneliness and mental health problems among students during the pandemic. Therefore, especially in times of crisis, fostering positive attachment dynamics in educational settings is essential to promoting the well-being of primary school students and creating a nurturing environment that supports their social, emotional, and academic development. By fostering secure attachments with teachers, and peers at school, students can develop the emotional resilience and support systems necessary for students' psychological growth and academic success.

COVID-19 pandemic and schooling

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected students worldwide, especially those in primary school. The effects of a pandemic can be observed across many aspects of their life, including education, mental health, social interactions, and overall well-being. School closures and the shift to distance learning have upended traditional classroom-based education and created many challenges for primary school students. Many primary school students find it difficult to adapt and engage in this new way of schooling due to limited access to Internet and technology, and lack of face-to-face interaction with peers and teachers (Meinck, Fraillon & Strietholt, 2022; UNESCO, 2020a; UNESCO 2020b; UNICEF, 2021).

Research suggests that prolonged school closures and disruptions led to learning losses, further exacerbating educational inequalities among students. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds faced more significant difficulties in accessing quality education and resources during the pandemic (UNICEF, 2021).

The mental health and well-being of students has also been affected by the pandemic. Prolonged periods of isolation, uncertainty, and anxiety have contributed to increased stress, loneliness, and emotional difficulties among primary school students (London & Ingram, 2018; Meinck, et al., 2022; Pincus et al., 2020; Talmus 2019; UNICEF, 2022;). The lack of social interactions and support systems in schools has also impacted their overall emotional development, as regular face-to-face interactions with peers and teachers foster social skills, emotional intelligence, and overall social development (Rundle et al. 2020; UNICEF, 2021).

The pandemic has also exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities among primary school students, disproportionately affecting those from low-income families, marginalised communities and those with special needs. Access to technology, resources, and support systems has posed significant challenges for these students (Schoeps et al., 2021).

Studies have revealed alarming statistics about the risk of dropout due to COVID-19. In 2020, approximately 23.8 million children, adolescents, and young people were at risk including 5.2 million primary and secondary school students being particularly affected (UNESCO, 2020b). Engzell, Frey and Verhagen (2021) found that primary school students in the Netherlands experienced a learning loss of 3 percentage points during the first eight weeks of distance education, emphasizing the gravity of the situation.

In Türkiye, schools were closed between March 16 and March 30 in 2020 (MoNE, 2020). Then distance learning via Internet and television was introduced for students. However, 39% of poor

households with school-age children had access to the internet and devices in 2020 (Ergün & Arık, 2020). As a result, many primary school students encountered obstacles accessing or adapting to online educational platforms, because of limited technology and internet access, which limited their motivation and engagement in face-to-face activities with teachers and classmates (Atalay, 2021; Ergün & Arık 2020; Hurriyet, 2021; Tunca, Kesbiç, & Gencer, 2021: TEDMEM, 2020). In addition, the enrollment rate for children aged 6-9 is expected to decrease by 0.4 percentage points from the previous year, resulting in an enrollment rate of 93.2% in the country (ERG, 2021). This decline highlights the risk of increased dropout rates, with approximately 29,000 children in primary education facing the possibility of leaving school (Chircop & Gimeno, 2021). Indeed, about 570,293 students aged 6-17 were out of school in 2021-22 (Tunca et al., 2022).

Method

This study used a qualitative research design. Understanding students' perceptions about school post-COVID-19 through metaphors is an effective approach to uncovering the complexity and depth of these experiences and overcoming linguistic and methodological challenges. According to Overland (2010), the nature of language and the experience being communicated present unique methodological and ethical challenges. Translations are inherently epistemic approximations that are at least four steps removed from the source. These steps include “how did the interviewer understand and translate my question, and how did the interviewee understand it; how did the interviewer understand and translate the answer, and how did I understand and present it”, and so on. Another dimension is added to communication, even everyday communication, by the intervention of subjectivity between the researcher and the participant. In this context, analysing primary students' experiences through metaphors is an effective way to overcome these linguistic and experiential barriers.

Using metaphor, this study seeks to capture students' perceptions of the school environment and the individuals within it. This method provides a more accurate reflection of students' subjective experiences and perceptions, offering valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers.

Participants

The study group consisted of 137 fourth-grade primary school students from a big industrial city in Türkiye. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, these students received distance education between 2019 and 2021. Only toward the end of the second half of the 2021 academic semester were students able to enroll in the school for face-to-face instruction. It is worth noting that some of the students faced difficulties in accessing lessons due to technological drawbacks or economic conditions. Participants gave informed consent and were allowed to withdraw at any time. Participants ranged in age from 9 to 10 years and were equally divided between females (n=69) and males (n=68).

Data Collection

Data were collected through questionnaires once students had returned to school for face-to-face teaching in the second half of the 2021 academic year. The questionnaire included open-ended statements designed to elicit students' perceptions of school, school principal, and teacher, and the reasons behind these perceptions. The participants were asked to complete statements such as 'School is like...' and 'Because...'.

The participants were students who had volunteered at the end of the 2020-2021 academic year. The data collection process took an average of 30 minutes. Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the study. This ensured the protection of participants' confidentiality, rights, and informed consent. Official approval was received from the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), and consent for student participation was obtained from the school principals for student participation. In addition, students assured that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed qualitatively. To ensure inter-coder reliability, the researcher and a field expert analysed the data separately. The preliminary analysis was a review of the data collection on the research topics. Then, metaphorical images and reasons given by respondents were

selected and documented on a computer using a word processing program. The documented files were printed out and prepared for metaphor analysis, which was subsequently conducted using the methodology of Schechter et al. (2016).

These three steps were followed: condensing, coding, and categorizing. Data condensation is the process of focusing, selecting, simplifying, transforming and/or abstracting the data that appear in the entire body of written documents. Condensation makes the data more meaningful (Miles et al., 2014). Therefore, in the first stage (condensation), the responses from the questionnaires were carefully read to get a general idea of the variety of metaphorical images mentioned by the respondents. In this stage, it was determined that not all the data collected could serve the purpose of the study and that the expressions needed to be sorted (Miles et al., 2014). As a result, expressions that were not metaphors or did not relate to the source were eliminated.

After the elimination process, the initial metaphor codes were created. Coding refers to identifying one or more text passages that exemplify a thematic idea and assigning them a shorthand label (Gibbs, 2012). According to Gibbs (2012), this process begins with simply reading the texts and attempting to tease out what is happening. Therefore, the identified metaphors were coded thematically (Cassell & Bishop, 2019) by two researchers. Then the codes of the two researchers were tested the validity of our analyses by calculating the consensus rate using the formula “Reliability = Consensus/ (Consensus + Disagreement)” as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The formula revealed a consensus of 99%, meaning that the analysis was considered reliable for the research. For the remaining 1%, the researchers reached a consensus by mutually re-evaluating the data before presenting the findings. While the metaphor analyst may strive to capture all metaphors in the dataset, it is common to reduce the analysis to one or a limited number of domains that allow for thematic focus (Kimmel, 2012; Deignan, Semino & Paul, 2019). Accordingly, metaphors were coded and categorised based on their conceptual domains, and major labels were assigned to each classified image group (see Table 1).

Table 1. Example of the coding

Metaphorical group	Images
School as a vehicle	Airplane, car, bus

Categorizing is how we understand and deal with the complexity of data in everyday life. Categorizing is a process that allows us to identify patterns and derive and justify our understanding (Richards & Morse, 2012). This systematic process allowed for the identification of recurring metaphors and their underlying conceptual mappings. Once the metaphors were coded and categorised, their meanings were interpreted.

Findings and Discussion

The data analysis revealed several metaphors related to different aspects of the school environment. Specifically, four metaphors were identified for school, three for school principals, three for vice school principals, and two for teachers.

Metaphors about school

The results showed 24 images and four metaphors representing school as a source of learning, a vehicle, a place of fun, and a place of love and trust. The metaphor labelled ‘school as a source of learning’ consisted of images of ‘book, house of knowledge, knowledge, library, course, teacher, book of knowledge, world, and cloud’. These images emphasise the role of school as a source of knowledge and intellectual growth. Thus, it reflects students' recognition of school as a place where they acquire essential knowledge and skills, emphasizing the primary function of schools as places of knowledge acquisition and intellectual growth. Through the lens of attachment theory, this result reflects students' perceptions of school as a secure base for intellectual growth. According to attachment theory, a secure base provides children with the confidence to explore and engage with their environment while knowing they have a safe foundation to return to (Bowlby, 1998). In this context, the school functions as both a place of intellectual stimulation and emotional security, fulfilling dual roles critical to child development. The association of school with love and trust further reinforces the attachment-related perspective. Positive relationships with teachers and peers in schools can mirror secure attachment

relationships, fostering emotional well-being and enhancing learning outcomes (Ainsworth, 1989). Moreover, the recognition of school as a place of fun highlights the role of positive emotions in the learning process. Attachment theory underscores the significance of emotional safety in facilitating exploration and engagement, key components of intellectual and social growth (Bowlby, 1998).

The metaphor 'school as a source of learning' underscores its role in intellectual development. These perceptions align with attachment theory, which posits that secure attachments in educational settings are vital for fostering a positive school experience and intellectual growth (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Murray & Greenberg, 2000). Moreover, viewing school as a source of learning and intellectual growth parallels the theory's assertion that secure attachments encourage cognitive development. So, this result is in line with Graham (2005).

The metaphor labelled 'school as a vehicle' highlights the perception of education as a means of transport towards future opportunities and personal growth. This metaphor is consistent with attachment theory, which stresses the importance of secure educational relationships for student development (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). Within the framework of attachment theory, Bowlby (1998) emphasizes the importance of secure relationships in enabling individuals to explore their environment and pursue long-term goals. In this context, the perception of school as a 'vehicle' resonates with the notion of the school serving as a secure base, providing students with the emotional stability and support needed to embark on their journey toward personal and academic development.

A secure attachment environment within schools, fostered by positive relationships with teachers and peers, can empower students to view education as a pathway to achieving future aspirations. This aligns with the idea that secure attachments encourage exploration and confidence, allowing individuals to take risks and envision possibilities beyond their immediate circumstances (Ainsworth, 1989). By providing not only knowledge but also emotional support, schools can serve as "vehicles" that drive students toward self-actualization and broader opportunities, both academically and personally. Secure attachments with school staff provide a stable and supportive environment that can increase students' confidence and motivation to pursue their goals. When students feel emotionally safe and supported, they are more likely to be actively engaged in their education and view school as a pathway to achieving their goals (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). This supportive relationship is a catalyst that drives students toward academic success and personal development, much like a vehicle that propels them forward on their educational journey (Murray & Greenberg, 2000). Furthermore, attachment theory highlights the importance of predictability and consistency in relationships to foster a sense of safety and trust (Bowlby, 1998). Schools that provide such consistency can instill in students the belief that education is a reliable means of moving forward in life. This connection between emotional security and future-oriented thinking reinforces the idea that schools, much like secure relationships, play a foundational role in enabling growth and resilience.

The metaphor of 'school as a place of love and trust' is closely aligned with the principles of attachment theory that emphasise the importance of secure, nurturing relationships in promoting emotional well-being and positive developmental outcomes. The images included in this metaphor reflect students' perceptions of school as a safe and nurturing place. Thus, this metaphor emphasises the affective and social aspects of the school environment, suggesting that students perceive school as a safe and nurturing place where they develop positive relationships with teachers and classmates. According to attachment theory, a secure student-teacher relationship creates a foundation of trust and emotional security that is essential for effective learning and personal growth (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). When students feel loved and trusted in their school environment, they are more likely to exhibit higher levels of motivation, actively participate in educational activities, and develop positive social behaviours (Murray & Greenberg, 2000). This nurturing environment fosters a sense of belonging and emotional security. These are critical for resilience and coping with stress (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007) especially in times of crisis.

Finally, the 'school as a place of fun' metaphor reflects the role of positive emotional experiences in enhancing student engagement and well-being, which is consistent with attachment theory. According to Bergin and Bergin (2009), secure attachments to teachers and peers promote a

sense of safety and belonging that can help students enjoy and participate in school. Viewing school as an enjoyable environment suggests that students feel comfortable and secure in their educational environment, which is essential for effective learning and social interaction. Secure attachments facilitate positive emotions and attitudes toward school, transforming it into a place where students not only learn, but also find joy and satisfaction in their daily experiences (Murray & Greenberg, 2000; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). As Sabol and Pianta (2012) emphasised, this pleasant school atmosphere, reinforced by strong, supportive relationships, is critical to developing students' love of learning and resilience.

These findings are also consistent with the literature (Saban, 2011; Tulunay-Ates, 2016; Öztapak, 2017; Ertan-Kantos & Gokce, 2022). Therefore, participants' perceptions of school did not seem to be changed by the pandemic. Figure 1 shows the word cloud of the images participants created for school.



Figure 1. Participants' images for the school

Metaphors about school principal

The findings revealed 22 images and three distinct metaphorical categories: principal as protector,' 'principal as administrator,' and 'principal as 'authoritative power'. The metaphor labelled as 'principal as a protector' included images of 'brother, goodness, reliable person, angel, rock, uncle, and helper.' The images associated with this category convey the students' belief that the principal is someone they can rely on and trust. Therefore, this metaphor highlights the participant's perception of the principal as a figure of security and support. Bowlby (1982) posited that attachment figures, such as caregivers, serve as sources of security and protection, enabling individuals to feel safe enough to explore their environments and engage in growth-promoting activities. In the school context, the principal, as a protector, fulfills this role by embodying qualities of reliability, safety, and emotional support, akin to the functions of a secure attachment figure. Therefore, this metaphor aligns with attachment theory's emphasis on the importance of a secure base in fostering trust and resilience. Students who perceive the principal as a 'protector' may feel a greater sense of safety within the school environment, which, in turn, enables them to focus on learning, social relationships, and self-

development. The symbolic association of the principal with terms like ‘rock’ or ‘angel’ further underscores their role as a stabilizing force, providing emotional security amidst challenges or uncertainties, a critical factor in promoting attachment-based security (Ainsworth, 1989).

Moreover, the protective metaphor indicates that students value the principal not only as an authoritative figure but also as someone who actively safeguards their well-being. This relational dynamic mirrors the caregiving role in attachment theory, where responsiveness and emotional availability are crucial in establishing a secure relationship (Bowlby, 1988). When students perceive the principal as a ‘helper’ or a ‘reliable person’ they may view the school as a supportive environment, reinforcing the broader attachment framework of schools serving as secure bases for exploration and growth.

The metaphor entitled ‘principal as administrator’ consisted of images of ‘father, administrator, president, school owner, king, sun, continents, rock, mother, scientist, and bee’. The images associated with this category suggest that students view the principal as someone with significant administrative power and decision-making responsibilities. Therefore, this metaphor emphasises the principal's role in organizational and managerial tasks within the school. Through the lens of attachment theory, the principal serves as an attachment figure, analogous to a caregiver, whose authoritative and nurturing presence helps to create a stable and secure school environment. Secure attachments to principals can enhance students' academic success and emotional well-being by providing a reliable place to explore and engage in educational experiences (Murray & Greenberg 2000), like secure attachments to teachers.

Finally, the metaphor labelled ‘principal as authoritative power’ included images of ‘soldier and hero’. These images reflect a perception of the principal as a figure of authority and leadership. This metaphor highlights students' recognition of the principal's leadership qualities and their belief in the principal's ability to protect and guide the school community. In the context of attachment theory, this perception may facilitate secure attachments in school environments where students feel supported and guided by strong leadership. Conversely, if authoritative power is perceived as overly rigid or intimidating, it may hinder the development of secure attachments, potentially affecting students' emotional and academic well-being (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). Thus, the metaphor highlights the dual potential of authority figures to either foster a safe, trusting environment or contribute to feelings of anxiety and insecurity, depending on the nature of their leadership and interactions with students (Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Murray & Greenberg, 2000). Attachment theory suggests that authority figures, such as principals, can serve as significant attachment figures, providing students with a sense of security and stability (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). When students perceive their principal as a protector, it fosters a safe and trusting school environment. The presence of such protective figures can buffer against stress and promote resilience, thereby improving the overall school experience for students (Murray & Greenberg, 2000). Moreover, this result is not consistent with the findings of Ertan-Kantos and Gokce (2022). Therefore, the pandemic appears to have changed participants' perceptions of school principals.

The last two metaphors are consistent with those found by Gökçe and Bülbül (2014) and Ertan-Kantos and Gokce (2022). Therefore, participants' perceptions of principals do not seem to have changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the ‘principal as protector’ metaphor shows that students also evaluate principals in terms of safety because of the pandemic. Figure 2 shows the word cloud of the images participants created for school principal.



Figure 2. Participants' images for the school principal

Metaphors about vice school principals

The findings identified 29 images and three metaphorical categories for vice principals: 'Vice school principal as helper,' 'Vice school principal as protector,' and 'vice school principal as executor.' The metaphor labelled 'vice principal as helper' included images of 'helper, mother, father, sunbeam, waiter, servant, messenger, father half, and helper'. The images associated with this category indicate that students view the vice principal as a caring and nurturing figure within the school environment. According to attachment theory, such supportive figures in schools are critical for students to develop secure attachments that promote positive school experiences and overall well-being (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). Secure attachments to school authorities, such as vice principals, can provide students with emotional security and a sense of stability which enhances their capability to cope with the social and academic challenges of school life (Murray & Greenberg, 2000). These supportive relationships act as a psychological 'secure base' that allows students to feel valued and understood, thereby promoting their resilience and engagement in school (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Similarly, the metaphor labelled 'Vice Principal as Protector' consisted of images of 'brother, uncle, friend, goodness, angel, stone, tree, school bag, father half, mask, cotton, and dessert'. The images associated with this category suggest that students view the vice principal as someone who provides safety and security within the school, that is, as a figure of protection and support. Therefore, this metaphor highlights the perception of the vice principal as a nurturing and protective figure within the school environment. This is consistent with attachment theory, which emphasises the importance of supportive and secure relationships in promoting emotional stability and resilience (Ainsworth et al., 2015). Through the lens of attachment theory, such supportive figures serve as attachment figures, reinforcing positive emotional connections and contributing to a nurturing school climate (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Murray & Greenberg, 2000). The presence of an assistant principal who embodies protective qualities can significantly enhance students' sense of security, mirroring the role of primary caregivers in early attachment processes (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

The metaphor labelled 'Vice Principal as Executor' includes images of 'helper, workaholic, manager, henchman, vice president, bird, teacher, and patriot'. These images suggest that students perceive the vice principal as someone who takes charge and ensures the efficient functioning of the school. Therefore, this metaphor emphasises the vice principal's role in managing operations, overseeing policies, and performing various administrative tasks. As mentioned earlier, a secure relationship with the school administration, including the vice principal, can help foster a supportive and trusting school climate that improves students' academic and emotional well-being (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Murray & Greenberg, 2000). Figure 3 shows the word cloud of the images participants created for vice school principal.

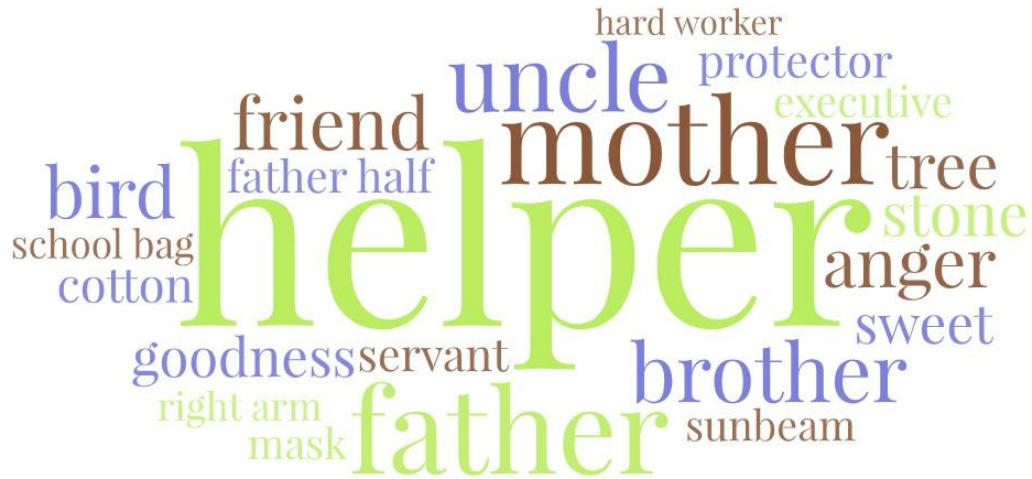


Figure 3. Participants' images for the vice principal

Metaphors about teachers

The results revealed 22 images and two sets of metaphors that illuminate how teachers are conceptualised: 'teacher as a source of knowledge' and 'teacher as loving and embracing.' The metaphor labelled 'Teacher as Source of Knowledge' included images of 'library, scholar, source of knowledge, book, everything, professor, informant, boss, sun, light, mother, father, family, and notebook'. These images suggest that participants view teachers as individuals who possess and share vast amounts of knowledge. This metaphor is closely related to attachment theory. According to attachment theory, when students perceive their teachers as sources of knowledge and support, they are more likely to develop secure attachments characterised by trust, emotional security, and a sense of belonging in the educational environment (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Murray & Greenberg, 2000; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). These secure attachments contribute to students' academic engagement and emotional well-being as they feel valued and supported in their pursuit of knowledge and intellectual growth within the school context.

The metaphor labelled 'teacher as loving and embracing' consisted of images of 'mother, rose, angel, flower, life, mermaid, mixed ice cream, and rainbow'. These images suggest that participants perceive teachers as individuals who provide emotional support, love, and guidance. This metaphor reflects participants' perceptions of teachers as figures who provide emotional nurturing, affection, and supportive guidance in the educational context. This interpretation is consistent with attachment theory. As scholars (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Murray & Greenberg, 2000; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Sabol & Pianta, 2012) have argued, secure attachments between teachers and students enhance students' emotional resilience and create an environment that fosters learning and personal development.

These findings are consistent with those found by Ertan-Kantos and Gokce (2022). Therefore, participants' perceptions of teachers did not seem to be changed by the pandemic. Figure 4 shows the word cloud of the images participants created for teacher.



Figure 4. Participants' images for the teacher

Conclusion and Suggestions

The results suggest that the images and understandings of school principals among primary school students may have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The protector metaphor emphasises the principal's role in creating a nurturing and safe environment for students, while the authoritative power metaphor portrays the principal as a figure of strength and influence. In conclusion, the findings suggest that the pandemic may have had a nuanced effect on participants' perceptions of principals. Consistent with attachment theory, the protector and authoritative power metaphors highlight the dual roles of principals in fostering a safe and supportive school environment while providing strong leadership and guidance. Despite the profound impact of the pandemic on various aspects of their lives, it appears that participants' deep understanding of school, based on these attachment-based perceptions of trust and authority, has remained largely unchanged. This resilience underscores the stability of attachment-based relationships in educational settings. It also underscores the importance of secure attachments in maintaining students' emotional and cognitive frameworks, even in times of crisis. Similarly, the metaphors describing vice principals suggest that students perceive vice principals as individuals who provide assistance, support, and protection to the school community. In addition, the metaphors for vice principals reveal some similarities and differences compared to principals. These findings can inform the development of policies and support mechanisms that align with student expectations and enhance the effectiveness of vice principals in their roles. In conclusion, the metaphors depicting the vice principal emphasise the perceived role of the vice principal. This finding also promotes a safe and supportive school environment, which is similar to the role of a secure attachment figure. Understanding these student perceptions can inform the development of targeted strategies and support mechanisms that align with student expectations and enhance the overall effectiveness of vice principals. These roles can also contribute to a nurturing school climate that promotes academic and emotional well-being.

Participants perceive teachers in terms of their knowledge and nurturing qualities. By viewing teachers as a source of knowledge, participants recognise the important role teachers play in facilitating learning and intellectual development. These metaphors underscore the dual role of educators in students' academic and emotional development. The recognition of teachers as central to learning and intellectual growth is consistent with foundational aspects of attachment theory that emphasise the importance of secure, supportive relationships in fostering developmental outcomes. In addition, the metaphor of teachers as loving and embracing emphasises the significance of teachers' emotional support and their ability to foster a positive and inclusive classroom atmosphere. In conclusion, these metaphors highlight the dual role of teachers in intellectual and emotional development. Consistent with attachment theory, these perceptions suggest that teachers provide essential emotional support that promotes a safe and nurturing learning environment and educational guidance. It is noteworthy that participants' perceptions of their teachers remained consistent even in the post-pandemic context. This

finding suggests that the underlying attachment relationships between students and teachers were resilient to the disruptions caused by the pandemic. This stability underscores the enduring importance of secure attachments in educational settings, which continue to shape students' experiences and perceptions regardless of external challenges.

The results of this study provide a foundation for further research and discussion on the perceptions and roles of schools and school personnel. The findings enhance our understanding of students' subjective experiences and can inform educational practices to foster more inclusive and supportive school environments.

Understanding students' perceptions through attachment theory underscores the importance of secure and supportive relationships in promoting positive teacher-student interactions and overall well-being. These findings can inform educational practices aimed at strengthening teacher-student relationships. Thus, educators and policymakers may gain valuable insights into the expectations, needs, and aspirations associated with school, school leadership, and the teaching profession by exploring and understanding students' metaphorical representations from an attachment perspective.

However, the study has several limitations, particularly in terms of generalizability. The findings were derived from a specific sample of primary school students in a particular setting. The qualitative nature of the study also limits the ability to make causal inferences and may be influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher. Therefore, it is important to note that the metaphorical representations captured in this study are based on the perspectives of the participants and may vary across different cultural and educational contexts. Thus, further research is recommended to gain a clearer understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' understanding of the school and its internal stakeholders.

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