

First-Grade Students' Feelings and Perceptions Toward School

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine first-grade students' feelings and perceptions toward school in three elementary schools with different socioeconomic status levels in Turkey. This qualitatively oriented multiple case study used students' drawings and semi-structured interviews as data collection methods. The findings of the study revealed that students perceived school as a playground, a happy place, a social environment, a physical environment, a learning or an unfriendly environment. In this study, several differences and similarities with respect to students' feelings and perceptions toward school are presented and discussed based on the schools from different socioeconomic levels. Implications and recommendations for teachers and school administrators are provided to promote the design of a school environment tailored to first-graders' needs and interests.

Keywords:

Drawings, Feelings Toward School, First Graders, Perception of School, School Perception, Socioeconomic Status

Introduction

Children attend school from an early age, and the school years are a very important part of their lives. Early school years play an important role in students' welfare and possible employment opportunities later in their lives (Ekstrand, 2015). More specifically, students' experiences in their early years can underpin their school adjustment and subsequent academic and social achievements, as well as their failures concerning their education (Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2009). The first school year is particularly of importance, as it provides the basis for students' future educational experiences (Yamaç, 2014). Students' feelings, attitudes, and perceptions developed in the early school years can provide a basis for students' interpretation of their school experiences in subsequent years (Valeski & Stipek, 2001) and can be helpful indicators of students' likely future success (Brock et al., 2008). This study focused on first-grade elementary school students' feelings and perceptions toward school. As the conceptualization of focal terms in research is crucial (Cevikbas & Kaiser 2020), the concepts of *perception* and *feeling* are explicitly defined and explained in this study to prevent any misunderstanding or misinterpretation. Accordingly, perception is defined as "the process or result of becoming



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aware of objects, relationships, and events by means of the senses, which includes such activities as recognizing, observing, and discriminating" (the American Psychological Association [APA] Dictionary of Psychology, 2021), and feeling is described as "a self-contained phenomenal experience. Feelings are subjective, evaluative and independent of the sensations, thoughts or images evoking them" (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2021). Perception denotes what someone or something symbolizes to a person (Despaigne, 2010), and feeling refers to a combination of complex, hidden emotions, real states, and thoughts affecting most of our attitudes (Andre, 2012).

Children's feelings and perceptions toward school may potentially affect several aspects, including their academic and social performance, participation in classroom activities, and achievement. Children who perceive school more favorably tend to make greater academic and social progress (Brock et al., 2008). Similarly, children who like school are likely to be more willing to engage in classroom activities (Valeski & Stipek 2001). When children like school, their academic competence is more likely to develop (Erath et al., 2008), while their achievement will also increase (Ireson & Hallam, 2005), and their motivation will be higher (Anderman, 2002; Summersett-Ringgold et al., 2015). In particular, children's feelings toward school during the early years may have several implications in the long run, impacting the degree to which children participate in the classroom activities and thereby promoting their further achievement (Ladd et al., 2000). It should also be noted that favorable perceptions of school are correlated with students' and schools' socioeconomic status (SES) (Summersett-Ringgold et al., 2015). Students from districts of high levels of poverty generally show poor achievement (Pogrow, 2006) and tend to like school less (Summersett-Ringgold et al., 2015). Similarly, schools with low SES may offer inadequate educational materials, extracurricular activities, and clubs serving students' interests, further contributing to negative perceptions of school (Summersett-Ringgold et al., 2015).

Feelings and perceptions toward school can be explored in various ways, such as surveys (Gray & McLellan, 2006), metaphors (Saban, 2008), and drawings (Yildiz 2012). Drawings can provide great insight into children's inner worlds and help them better express themselves (Malchiodi, 1998; Yavuzer, 2011). Drawings are considered one of the most common entertaining activities that children particularly enjoy the most, and children usually do not become bored while drawing. Students draw their pictures intuitively (Yolcu, 2009), and their drawings may reflect the characters, individuals, and values important to them and make their minds, thoughts, and experiences visible (Michael & Rajuan, 2009). In a wide range of studies, researchers have used students' drawings as a means of understanding children's perceptions of

various topics, such as school concept (Yildiz, 2012), teacher-child relationship (Harrison et al., 2007), and school violence (Yurtal & Artut, 2010).

In this study, drawings were used as an important tool to gain insight into students' feelings and perceptions toward school, to reveal how students at three schools located in at three schools in Turkey with low, middle, and high SES perceived school and what their feelings about school were. Several studies have investigated students' approaches to school, such as whether they like school (Şahin-Sak, 2019), their feelings about school (Valeski & Stipek, 2001), and the association between perception of the school environment and SES (Shackleton et al., 2018). Also, a study conducted by Yildiz (2012) approached the concept of school and used drawings to determine primary school students' perceptions of school. However, limited studies have conceptualized the relationship between first-grade students' feelings and perceptions toward school and the schools' SES backgrounds, primarily by examining their drawings. This qualitative study aims to fill this research gap and is guided by the following research question:

What are first-grade elementary school students' feelings and perceptions toward school at three elementary schools with different levels of SES (low, middle, and high)?

In detail, based on the aforementioned research question, the similarities and differences of first graders' feelings and perceptions toward school are investigated by focusing on different levels of SES of the schools attended.

Methodology

Research Design

The study was designed as a qualitatively oriented multiple case study. In qualitative case studies, a "bounded system" (a case) or "multiple bounded systems" (cases) are investigated in depth (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). In particular, multiple case studies allow researchers to identify the similarities and differences between different cases (Stake, 1995). This study investigates first-grade elementary school students' feelings and perceptions toward school at three elementary schools with different SES levels (low, middle, and high) using their drawings and semi-structured interviews. The similarities and differences between each case were examined. Based on their SES characteristics, each of these schools was identified as a case.

Participants

The study data were collected primarily from first-grade elementary school students in three

elementary schools in Turkey. Convenience and maximum variation sampling methods were utilized to select the elementary schools and first-grade students. The maximum variation sampling method “documents unique or diverse variations that have emerged in adapting to different conditions and identifies important common patterns that cut across variations” (Patton, 2002, p. 243), and boosts the likelihood of reflecting differences and diverse perspectives (Creswell, 2013). The three elementary schools in one of Turkey’s big cities were located in neighborhoods characterized by different SES levels (low, middle, and high), allowing for maximum variation. These schools were recruited among the districts based on the official report obtained from the General Directorate of Development Agencies in Turkey (Yılmaz et al., 2019). In this report, districts were classified into different levels depending on 32 variables of SES (e. g., demographics, employment, education, health, competitiveness, finance, and quality of life). The characteristics of schools are briefly detailed below.

School A

School A is a public school in a neighborhood mostly consisting of families with low or lower-middle SES backgrounds. The teachers reported that although some parents are high school graduates or have bachelor’s degrees, for the most part, the parents are elementary school graduates, and in some cases, illiterate. Each class has approximately 20–25 students, and the school has a library, a science laboratory, and a conference hall.

School B

School B is a public school in a neighborhood comprising families with middle SES backgrounds. The teachers reported that most of the parents are high school graduates and some hold bachelor’s degrees. Although there are other types of professions, the parents are generally civil servants. The school’s classes are relatively crowded, with approximately 30–35 students in each class. The school has a workshop, a science laboratory, a computer laboratory, a gymnasium, and a conference hall.

School C

School C is a private school in a neighborhood consisting of families with high SES backgrounds. The teachers reported that almost all parents have bachelor’s degrees and that some parents hold master’s and PhD degrees. The parents are academics, soldiers, judges, and solicitors. Each class has 20 students, and the school has a computer laboratory, a science laboratory, a music classroom, a library, an art room, and a dining hall.

Overall, 40, 57, and 36 students from School A, School B, School C, respectively, participated in the study. They were asked to draw pictures reflecting their feelings and perceptions about school. Semi-structured interviews were, then, conducted with several students. The researcher conferred with the teachers, and, based on their perspectives, students who had drawn the most salient pictures and who were best placed to contribute to data richness were selected for interview. The researcher aimed to interview students who had drawn different aspects of school, disclosing various perspectives on school and addressing maximum variation. The selection process yielded 24 students from School A, 18 students from School B, and 10 students from School C who participated in semi-structured interviews. The distribution of participants by gender and school is presented in Table 1. Each student from School A, B, and C was named after A-S1, A-S2, ..., B-S1, B-S2, ..., C-S1, C-S2, ..., etc.

Table 1

Distribution of Participants by School and Gender

Schools	Female	Male	Total
School A	25	15	40
School B	37	20	57
School C	19	17	36

Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

The study used students’ drawings and semi-structured interviews as the main data collection instruments. To expand on the importance of each data collection instrument for this study, in particular, students’ drawings were acknowledged as productive and convenient with respect to eliciting younger children’s feelings and perceptions, as drawings offered them the opportunity to express themselves precisely (Walker et al., 2009). Children may be reluctant to put what they feel and think into words; however, when children are allowed to both draw and describe their feelings verbally, they provide twice as much information as children who exclusively verbalize their thoughts (Gross & Hayne, 1998). The interview is a crucial instrument used in qualitative studies to determine the essential meaning that a particular experience carries (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To gain insight into first-grade students’ feelings and perceptions about school as much as possible, the researcher drew both on students’ drawings and responses to semi-structured interviews. The researcher developed a questionnaire to guide the interviews and revised it based on two experts’ opinions. The interview questionnaire consists of short open-ended questions with respect to students’ demographic information, the depictions in their drawings, and their feelings and perceptions about school. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the University’s Ethics Committee to ensure that the instruments and their implementation were appropriate for the first-grade students’ age

level and their psychological development. After the formal application, the Committee gave ethical approval for the instruments' application to the research context, and written permission from the school administrations and the participating students' parents was obtained. The data were collected toward the middle of the fall semester, which allowed the students to spend a certain amount of time at school and obtain their first experiences of the school environment to develop feelings and perceptions about school. The researcher then asked the first-grade students to draw the school image in their minds in the art lesson. Based on students' drawings and teachers' suggestions, students were selected for the interview.

Data Analysis

Two different data sources were used in this study: students' drawings and semi-structured interviews. To analyze the drawings, a rubric adapted from Cevikbas (2016) was used. In some recent studies, students' drawings have been used as a data collection source, and participants were asked to briefly clarify the objects they drew and the reasons why they drew these objects on the reverse of the paper to support the analysis of their drawings. This study's participants were not yet able to write similar explanations as it was their first semester at school, and they just began learning to read and write. The rubric used to analyze the students' drawings covered the following elements: lines, figures, body parts, emotions, and colors. Some examples from the rubric were exhibited as follows (see Cevikbas, 2016 for greater detail):

- Lines (e.g., round and unclosed lines refer to anxiety)
- Figures (e.g., light-colored, clouds, birds, and flowers suggest happiness; rain suggests sadness and anxiety)
- Body parts (e.g., arms extended on both sides indicate close relationships with other people)
- Emotions (e.g., drawing oneself isolated from others indicates feelings of rejection)
- Colors (e.g., black refers to negatively characterized figures)

To avoid misinterpretation of the students' drawings, interviews were used to clarify the meaning of their drawings in relation to school. For instance, regarding the use of color in drawings, Yavuzer (2011) reported that children mostly prefer colors that are attractive to them when drawing pictures. In other words, the use of color is individual to each child, and analysis of the colors used by children in their drawings is complex. As multiple data sources yield more comprehensive information than a single source about students' feelings and perceptions about school, the analysis of the students' drawings was additionally supported by the interviews.

To extract the data and reveal the key findings, the drawings were analyzed using content analysis (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). The students' drawings were all scrutinized individually and in accordance with the rubric, and codes were determined (see Appendix A for an exemplar of the coding). Content analysis was performed to analyze the student interviews. The raw data from the interviews were initially transcribed verbatim, and codes were specified. Following completion of the coding, double coding was performed. The intercoder analyzed 30% of the data, and 90% reliability was found based on the use of the formula developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Contradictory codes were specified and discussed until total agreement was attained. A sample analysis of a drawing and the researcher's interpretation is presented in Figure 1 to illustrate the analytical approach used in this study.

Figure 1

Drawing by C-S3 and Interpretation of the Drawing by C-S3



Detailed examination of the drawing showed that C-S3 described the classroom environment. There is a teacher figure standing before the board and there are some letters written on the board, indicating that the teacher is teaching something to the students in the classroom. These indicators demonstrated that C-S3 perceived school as a learning environment. In the interview with her, she stated that school was a place where she could learn how to read and write, and that learning new things at school made her happy.

Results

School as a Playground

The results indicated that several students from all three schools perceived school as a playground, based on their drawings and interviews. The students from School A ($f = 40\%$), School B ($f = 51\%$), and School C ($f = 50\%$) included several indicators of playgrounds in their school drawings, including playing, balloons, balls, trees, schoolyard, break time, and hopscotch in the school garden. Most students drew both schoolyards and school buildings with students playing; however, several students drew just the schoolyard without the school building. Although small differences were found among the students who drew playground indicators, those indicators were more frequently detected in drawings by students from Schools B and C than those from School A.

Figure 2

Drawing Examples by A-S26, B-S48, C-S16



The drawing of A-S26



The drawing of B-S48



The drawing of C-S16

As Figure 2 illustrates, A-S26 drew herself and her friends playing together with happy faces. She drew one of her friends playing with a ball. B-S48 drew a school building with the schoolyard. She also drew students with balloons in their hands, a hopscotch game, and ringing bells as a representation of break time. C-S16 drew himself playing with his friends in the school. While other students drew themselves playing outside the school building, he painted the playing environment inside the school building.

In the interviews, more than half of the students from all three schools indicated that school was a place where they could perform diverse activities, such as dancing, playing with playdough, watching cartoons, playing basketball, and playing with friends during break time. The students at School C, in particular, highlighted their attendance at clubs, such as dancing and sports clubs, at school. Students remarked during the interviews that they felt happy while playing with their friends during their breaks and when they performed activities that included drawing pictures and playing with playdough. Several students from School A, in particular, found the time they spent at home quite boring; however, they found their time at school to be of good quality and enjoyable because of the positive environment there. Several quotations from student interviews that illustrate these findings are presented as follows.

"I feel happy at school because I play with my friends. We play tag and blind man's bluff. They are very entertaining." (A-S9)

"I generally feel happy at school because I can play with my friends during breaks and learn lots of things at school." (B-S3)

"The thing I like most at this school is attending student clubs. Thanks to these clubs, I can do what I want at school. For example, at the club for entertainment, I can play with balls. There are other clubs in which I can learn to play instruments, do sports, dance, etc." (C-S6)

School as a Happy Place

Most students in the study perceived school as a happy place—that is, a place where students feel happy—and illustrated the school using bright and warm colors. The indicators used in the drawings to represent school as a happy place included happy faces, butterflies, flowers, birds, a smiling sun, rainbows, school with a red roof, bright, warm, and favorite colors, and elaboration of the school drawings with hearts and stars. Students from School A ($f = 70\%$), School B ($f = 75\%$), and School C ($f = 65\%$) drew those indicators in their drawings. Although the results were relatively close, it was observed that slightly more students from schools A and B perceived school as a happy place than students from School C.

Figure 3

Drawing Examples by A-S14, B-S45, C-S13



The drawing of A-S14



The drawing of B-S45



The drawing of C-S13

The drawings in Figure 3 indicate that A-S14 used warm and bright colors, such as pink and green, to represent the school building in addition to including flowers. B-S45 chose his favorite soccer team's colors (red and yellow) to paint the school building and drew smiling, happy students. C-S13 used hearts, flowers, and shapes to decorate their school picture. Although black is used in the picture, it was observed that warm colors were dominant.

The interviews supported the analysis of the drawings. Approximately half of the students from School A, less than half of the students from School B, and several students from School C reported that they felt happy at school and liked school, particularly indicating their perceptions of the school's interior, the schoolyard, and the classroom. A-S5 shared her feelings as follows: *"I like school and feel happy at school since we can go to the schoolyard during the long breaks and I look at the trees there, which makes me very happy."* The students also described their happiness at school, describing it as colorful and big. To illustrate, B-S18 indicated: *"Our school and classroom are highly colorful, as I expected. Therefore, I feel very happy at my school."* Similarly, C-S9 emphasized this fact, saying, *"I like school and the school garden as it is big, and I can play in the schoolyard with my friends. I am happy to be at school."*

School as a Social Environment

The social environment embodies "the immediate physical surroundings, social relationships, and cultural milieus within which defined group of people function and interact" (Barnett & Casper, 2001, p. 465). The study considered the social environment as an environment where students can make friends and develop good relationships with their teachers and peers. Students from all three schools drew pictures representing their interaction with their teachers and peers. Three students from School A ($f = 8\%$) and four students from School B ($f = 7\%$) drew the teacher figures proportionately larger and smiling, indicating that they value their teachers highly. Several students—five from School A ($f = 13\%$) and three from School B ($f = 5\%$)—drew their teachers with arms extended at both sides and large eyes, perhaps as indicators of the teachers' close relationships with their students. Similar to the teacher figures in drawings, students mainly drew their peers with smiling faces, arms extended on both sides, and large eyes. The drawings clearly portrayed students' close relationships with their peers, which may indicate that school functions as a place in which they can make friends and maintain friendships.

Figure 4
Drawing Examples by A-S17, B-S35, C-S18



The drawing of A-S17



The drawing of B-S35



The drawing of C-S18

As shown in Figure 4, A-S17, B-S35, and C-S18 illustrated their teachers larger with smiling faces and arms extended to either side. This may signify that they attach great importance to their teachers, and they consider them valuable in their lives and enjoy a close relationship with their teachers. For instance, A-S17 drew the teacher figure larger than the school building, and B-S35 drew the teacher figure almost the same height as the school building, which may mean either that the teacher is more important for the student than the school itself or that the teacher and school are of equal importance to them. The students also drew their peers with smiling faces and arms extended to both sides, which may signify their close relationships with their peers.

Students' interviews are in line with these findings. They reported that they perceived school as a social environment. More than half of the students at schools A, B, and C described school as a place where they can make friends, become socialized, and enjoy good relationships with their teachers and peers. Regarding their feelings about school, they stated that they liked school because their teachers liked them and did not get angry with them; they could make friends, had many friends at school, and had conversations with their friends. Examples from students' interviews are presented below.

"I like school because I have good friends and teachers at school. I talk to my friends and my teacher, and I learn many things thanks to my teacher." (A-S10)

"I have a good relationship with my friends and my teacher. My teacher lets us play together and talk about things at school." (B-S9)

"I feel happy when I have friends at school. I play games of ninja and robot with my close friends. We act out as in a movie, and we each have a role." (C-S5)

School as a Physical Environment

Analysis of the students' drawings showed that students perceived school as a physical environment, drawing the schools' physical characteristics of the school and various parts, such as the school building itself, the schoolyard, the canteen, the gymnasium, the drama hall, and the classroom. The students from School A ($f = 58\%$), School B ($f = 84\%$), and School C ($f = 72\%$) drew the school building itself to reflect the image in their minds.

While the school buildings drawn in more than half of the drawings resembled the students' actual school buildings, nearly half of the students drew school buildings that are different from their actual schools. Several students from schools A and B drew flags near the school building, while no students from School C included flags. Moreover, two students from School B drew their dream school, and another student from School B drew the school building to resemble her kindergarten.

All students drew the school building with a schoolyard. One student from School A, two students from School B, and five students from School C drew their classrooms. Several students from School B also drew canteens and gymnasiums, as these were present in their school environment.

Figure 5
Drawing Examples by A-S2, B-S7, C-S4



The drawing of A-S2



The drawing of B-S7



The drawing of C-S4

As illustrated in Figure 5, A-S2 drew the school building with the schoolyard illustrated with a flag nearby. Rather than the school building, B-S7 drew the classroom with a board, cupboards, and the teacher's table, and described their classroom environment. C-S4 drew the school building only to refer to the school image. The drawings illustrated that students from all three schools mostly painted their actual school and classroom environments in their drawings.

Apart from the various school departments — for instance, schoolyards, classrooms, and school buildings—six students from School A and two students from School C preferred to draw their homes, indicating that they perceived their schools as resembling their homes. Furthermore, one student from School C drew a castle because she associated school with a castle. Sample drawings are presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6
Drawing Examples by A-S24, C-S1



The drawing of A-S24



The drawing of C-S1

The student interviews generated several metaphors for the home figures drawn by students. Metaphors can leave traces of reflections of one's worldview and perceptions (Postman, 2011); they can serve as clues for the students' perceptions of school.

In the interviews, students revealed that their schools and homes were similar in various aspects, such as appearance. More than half of the students from schools A and B and nearly half of the students from School C in the interviews used a home metaphor for school. To illustrate, A-S3 expressed herself as follows: "School is like our second home. I study and play both at school and home. They are alike." Similarly, B-S4 pointed out that school was like her home, saying, "The school is like our home, and I feel like I am at my home." C-S3 came up with the same metaphor, stating, "Our home comes to my mind in relation to school. In my opinion, school resembles our home."

School as a Learning Environment

A comprehensive analysis of the data from students' drawings and interviews showed that several students perceived school as a learning environment. The students drew the classroom environment with desks, boards, letters on the board, and teacher figures teaching students as indicators of school as a learning environment. One student from School A (f = 2.5%), three students from School B (f = 5%), and two students from School C (f = 5.5%) described school as a learning environment and drew accordingly. Although few differences were observed among the number of students drawing the learning environment indicators, more students from schools B and C perceived school as a learning environment. Sample drawings are presented in Figure 7.



The drawing of B-S51



The drawing of C-S6

Figure 7
Drawing Examples by A-S40, B-S51, C-S6



The drawing of A-S40

While relatively few drawings reflected perceptions of school as a learning environment, more students in the interviews described school as an environment for learning new things. Several students from all three schools reported that school was a place for them to learn new things, such as reading, writing, counting, mathematics, important virtues like respect, studying, and doing homework. They also emphasized in the interviews that they liked school as they could learn new things, study, and do homework at school. A-S4, B-S2, and C-S3 reflected their feelings as follows:

"I like school as I learn everything at school. I learn to read and write the letters a and b." (A-S4)

"I like school since we not only learn how to read and write but also learn to be respectful toward others." (B-S2)

"I like school as I learn new letters and numbers and how to read and write there." (C-S3)

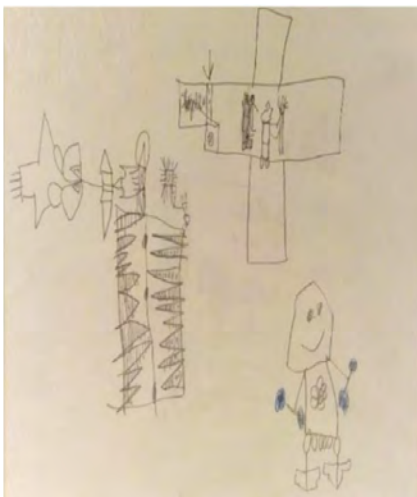
School as an Unfriendly Environment

Despite the predominance of positive perceptions of and feelings toward school, including school as a playground and a happy place, several indicators that students perceived school as an unfriendly environment were also disclosed. Indicators of feeling insecure, anxious, and lonely, and disliking school suggested that some students perceived school as an unfriendly environment. Grotesque figures like robots and human figures without arms, hands, legs, or feet in students' drawings indicated feelings of insecurity at school. Ten students from School A ($f = 25\%$), 11 students from School B ($f = 19\%$), and four students from School C ($f = 11\%$) drew those indicators, suggesting that fewer students from School C experienced insecurity at school. As the sample drawings in Figure 8 show, A-S35 illustrated grotesque figures; similarly, B-S12 had some robot-like figures, and C-S2 drew some armless human figures.

Figure 8
Drawing Examples by A-S35, B-S12, CS2



The drawing of A-S35



The drawing of B-S12



The drawing of C-S2

Rain, students' anxious, shaded faces, figures without eyes, noses, or mouths in the students' drawings also indicated anxiety, sadness, and timidity at school. Five students from School A ($f = 12.5$), seven students from School B ($f = 12\%$), and two students from School C ($f = 5.5\%$) drew those indicators. For instance, A-S20 drew rain falling on the school, B-S27 drew two children with no nose or mouth near the school, and C-S9 drew children with shaded faces, as illustrated in Figure 9.

Figure 9
Drawing Examples of A-S20, B-S27, C-S9



The drawing of A-S20



The drawing of B-S27



The drawing of C-S9

Some students drew themselves alone without their mouths or noses and drew relatively tall buildings in some drawings as indicators of feeling lonely at school. A few students, two from School A ($f = 5\%$) and two from School B ($f = 3.5\%$), drew these indicators. None of the students' drawings in School C showed signs of feeling lonely. As shown in Figure 10, A-S36 only drew himself without a happy face in his drawings, and similarly, B-S50 drew herself without a happy face next to a relatively high school building. It is worth remarking that in those drawings, students drew themselves without a mouth and nose indicating that they feel both timid and alone at school.

Figure 10
Drawing Examples by A-S36, B-S50



The drawing of A-S36



The drawing of B-S50

Finally, the interviews with the students revealed why they felt unhappy at school. Less than half of the students from all three schools expressed that being unsuccessful, being punished, and being exposed to peer violence, and teachers who are angry with students made them unhappy at school.

Moreover, some students from School A complained about the cold weather and walking to school. A-S8 stated, "My home is far away from the school. I do not like this, and I do not want to walk to school every day. It is so exhausting." B-S7 complained about the timing of school, saying "The school ends in the evening, and we have to go home in the dark. Therefore, I feel unhappy. I wish the school would end earlier." Although they mentioned their reasons for feeling unhappy, it is notable that C-S1 clearly expressed his dislike for school as follows:

"I do not like school, actually. Of course, there are some courses that I like, such as mathematics and computers. However, I do not like the courses except the ones I mentioned above. The Turkish course is the course that I do not like most because it is so boring."

Interestingly, another student from School C included the superhero the Hulk in his drawing (see Figure 11). In the interview, he stated that he drew the Hulk so that the Hulk could destroy the school. Although the student did not clearly state that he did not like school, the drawing and his words offer some clues about why he might not like school and why he feels unhappy at school.

Figure 11

The Drawing of C-S7



Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated first-grade elementary students' feelings toward and perceptions of school and compared the related results based on the school type in terms of SES background. The data were collected from three elementary schools with low, middle, and high SES levels in Turkey. Building on the importance of elementary education and, notably, first-grade education, the study revealed crucial findings with respect to feelings toward and perceptions of school during first graders' critical learning period. The main findings reveal that school was perceived positively by most of the first-grade students from all three schools, and this can be interpreted as leading to better academic and social performance for these students (Brock et al., 2008).

Correspondingly, the results indicated that the majority of the students liked school. In the literature, liking school is associated with willingness to engage in classroom activities (Valeski & Stipek, 2001), development in academic competence (Erath et al., 2008), increased achievement (Ireson & Hallam, 2005; Ladd et al., 2000), and motivation (Anderman, 2002; Summersett-Ringgold et al., 2015). However,

fewer students perceived school more negatively and as an unfriendly environment. Perceiving school negatively can negatively affect academic and social performance of the students (Brock et al., 2008).

As part of the positive feelings toward and perceptions of school, the first-grade students in all three schools perceived school as a playground. The results showed that students generally drew themselves playing with their friends in schoolyards, and their drawings often reflected that they felt happy at school while playing with their friends. Playing with friends at school was one of the main reasons for first graders' happiness at school (Şahin-Sak, 2019).

In line with this result, Calp (2020) also reported that children felt happy at schools where they could both learn and play. Perceptions of school as a playground may be due to first-grade students' developmental characteristics. Snowman and Biehler (2006) stated that children of these ages are quite active and tend to engage in physical activities; thus, they may find it quite difficult and boring to study in the classroom instead of playing with their friends. Moreover, since they were accustomed to a preschool environment that was not very strict and where they were given more time to play, they might envisage school as more of a playground. Also, despite a few differences, more students attending the schools with middle and high SES backgrounds drew playground indicators, reflecting the better facilities and conditions that those schools enjoy. In particular, students from schools with high SES emphasized their attendance at clubs for dancing, acting, and playing sport in describing why they liked school. More clubs appealing to students' interests and extracurricular activities offered by schools may be associated with positive perceptions of school (Summersett-Ringgold et al., 2015).

Students also perceived school as a happy place. It was noted that more students from low and middle SES schools drew happy place indicators than those from the school with high SES, despite the latter's more desirable conditions. Interestingly, students from the schools with high SES did not see school as a happy place as much as students from the low and middle SES schools did, although more students from the schools with high SES perceived school as a playground. Many students especially from the low SES school, portrayed school as a happy place despite the school's weaker conditions than the other two schools. They saw school as a place where they felt happy, though the school had problems with cleaning. The study by Balci (1999) presented consistent results regarding students' positive attitudes toward school despite the lack of water in toilets. This shows that some problems with respect to cleaning in schools may not be associated with perceptions of school as a happy place and feelings of happiness at school.

The results indicated that students perceived school as a social environment. Drawings by the students from all schools were similar to one another in that most described the school image by drawing themselves and their friends together having good relations with each other. Similarly, they expressed that they could make friends and contact each other every day at school. Schools can provide students with an environment for making friends and becoming socialized in districts composed of apartments. Students perceived school as a place where they could meet friends and said they enjoyed having friends and getting along well with their friends at school (Lahelma, 2002). Supporting this result, Booth and Sheehan (2008) also highlighted that developing good friendships and relations with peers can be associated with feeling happy and comfortable at school and being content with the school environment. The social environment embraces relations with teachers, and students' relations with their teachers may be decisive in a satisfactory school environment (Booth & Sheehan, 2008). In students' drawings, teachers were drawn with smiling faces and extending their arms on both sides, indicating good relationships between students and teachers. The interviews findings supported this result, and it is important to young children as favorable relations with teachers enhance children's positive feelings toward school in earlier grades (Valeski & Stipek, 2001).

Furthermore, school was perceived as a physical environment with respect to its physical qualities. The students' drawings showed that they mainly drew school buildings to reflect the school image in their mind; in particular, more students from schools with middle and high SES drew school buildings in their drawings. They tended to draw school buildings similarly to their school buildings, which may indicate the impact of the school's physical environment on school perception. Better physical qualities of middle and high SES schools may lead students in those schools to draw school buildings that reflect the actual conditions in their schools more often. Similarly, schools were often drawn with their actual physical qualities by primary school students (Yildiz, 2012), and this was interpreted as reflecting students' perceptions of the school as a formal structure. Interestingly, some students drew their homes to represent school. In their interviews, students used a "home" metaphor to reflect their perceptions (Postman, 2011), which suggests that they may associate school with their homes and see school as their second home. This may be because teachers and parents might introduce schools as a second home to students, and students might associate schools with their home as a building. Moreover, first-grade students perceived school as a learning environment in which literacy skills such as reading, writing, and computational skills are acquired. It was found that slightly more students from schools

with middle and high SES drew learning environment indicators. The clues regarding perceptions of school as a learning environment were not found often in students' drawings; nonetheless, it was clearly seen in their statements that they felt happy because of learning new things at school. Several other studies also emphasized the school's role as a place of enlightenment and information (Balci, 1999; Şahin-Sak, 2019). Learning new things at school was cited as one of the reasons for liking school, and students who like and enjoy school are likely to study harder, leading to better performance (Şahin-Sak, 2019; Valeski & Stipek, 2001). Still, in consideration of drawings as an effective means of becoming better informed about children's inner worlds (Malchiodi, 1998; Yavuzer, 2011), students' drawings can say a lot about how school was indeed perceived no matter what they mentioned in the interviews. Thus, as it was their first year, the school's role as a place to play with friends and make friends may mean more to them than its role as a place for learning new things.

Apart from the results pertinent to positive feelings toward and perceptions of school, the study findings also revealed that some students perceived school as an unfriendly environment and that some points, including failure, inability to do homework, peers' misbehaviors, such as bullying, and teachers' anger with students might bring about unhappiness at school. In particular, peers' bullying and violence were found to negatively impact feelings toward school and lead to perceptions of school as an unfriendly environment. Students who perpetrated and were exposed to bullying perceive the school climate more negatively (Harel-Fisch et al., 2011). It also emerged that few students from schools with low and middle SES and none of the students from high SES schools included indicators of loneliness in their drawings. This may be because their teachers are more caring and have closer relationships with their students. Experiencing loneliness and feeling lonely at school were found to account for disliking school to some extent (Harel-Frisch et al., 2011; Rönkä et al., 2017). Notably, the results suggest that only a few students from the school with high SES expressed a dislike for school. Considering that students' experiences at school at early years can have lasting effects on their school life and their future career (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999), negative experiences and perceptions in school climate are possible to get more negative in the course of time, especially among students with a low SES background (Conchas & Noguera, 2004), which may result in lower academic achievement (Johnson & Stevens, 2006). From the sociological and critical pedagogy perspectives, schools are castigated as places where social inequalities and class differences are reproduced (Althusser, 2016; Bourdieu, 1977; McLaren, 2000). In this sense, it is critical for students, in particular students from schools with low SES, to

have positive experiences and perceptions of school to establish a rigorous ground for their educational life.

The study produced important results regarding first-grade students' feelings toward and perceptions of school. The findings revealed that first-grade students largely perceived school as a happy place and playground and felt happy as they could play at school. Students also perceived school as a social environment where they could make friends, enjoy good relationships with their peers and teachers, and feel happy at school. Such findings suggest that the first year at school is important in children's lives, and the development of positive feelings and perceptions during this critical year is crucial. To this end, teachers and school administrators can create a school environment with the support of parents that will address first graders' needs and interests, and in which they can enjoy and learn, make friends, and do not feel bored. Also, undesirable circumstances, such as bullying, violence, victimization by peers, and the need to walk to school were found to play a role in negative perceptions of school and unhappiness at school. Overall, the school environment, facilities, and students' SES appear to play an important role in first-grade students' feelings toward and perceptions of school.

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Appendix A

Codes and Descriptions

The exemplary codes for three categories and the related descriptions of codes are provided below. The coding schedule was prepared based on the literature on how to make sense of the students' drawings (Altinköprü, 2003; Burkitt, et al., 2005; Burns & Kaufman, 1972; Die Leo, 1983; Furth, 2002; Koppitz, 1968; Malchiodi, 1998; Paktuna-Keskin, 2003; Yavuzer, 2011)

Categories	Exemplary Codes	Brief Descriptions
School as a playground	toys and games	the desire to play games
	balls	the desire to play games
	school yard	the desire to play in the school garden
	hopscotch	the desire to play outside
	breaktime	the desire to play in the breaks
School as a happy place	balloons	fun and joy
	trees	joy and cheerfulness
	happy faces	feeling happy at school
	butterflies	seeking for love and beauty
	flowers	happiness
	birds	happiness
	a smiling sun	happiness
	rainbow	happiness
	school with a red roof	happy place
	bright and warm colors	happiness
	hearts and stars on the picture	feeling happy and liking school
	School as an unfriendly environment	grotesque figures like robots
human figures without arms, hands, legs, or feet		feeling insecure at school
rain		anxiety and sadness
anxious and shaded faces		anxiety
figures without eyes, noses, or mouths		anxiety and timidity
drawing only the child himself		feeling alone
tall buildings		reflection of tension and loneliness