The impact of student engagement and school environment on psychological well-being

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Abstract

This study examined how student engagement and the school environment influence psychological well-being, with social skills serving as a mediating factor. A quantitative research design was employed using multiple regression and correlation analyses to explore the relationships among the key variables. The study involved 272 students selected through stratified random sampling to ensure balanced representation across demographic and academic groups. Results indicated that both student engagement and the school environment significantly predicted psychological well-being, while social skills played a crucial mediating role in strengthening these associations. The analysis demonstrated that students with higher engagement and better social competence reported greater psychological well-being within supportive school settings. These findings highlight the interconnected nature of engagement, environmental support, and interpersonal development in promoting mental health among students. The study suggests that educational institutions should foster inclusive environments, encourage interactive learning, and implement social skills training to enhance overall student well-being.

Keywords: Psychological well-being; school environment; social skills; student engagement; well-being enhancement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Psychological well-being is a crucial aspect of development during young adulthood, particularly for college students navigating significant transitional life phases. This period, often characterized by shifts in identity, increased responsibilities, and exposure to new social and academic demands, can lead to heightened vulnerability to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Tobolowsky, 2018). The challenges faced during this time not only diminish students' quality of life but also adversely affect their academic performance and retention rates (Wynaden et al., 2013; Hadar et al., 2020).

Understanding the factors that foster psychological well-being in higher education settings is essential for promoting student success and mental health (Zheng & Huang, 2025). Among these determinants, student engagement has emerged as a fundamental predictor. Defined as the degree of involvement, enthusiasm, and commitment a learner demonstrates toward academic activities (Fredricks et al., 2004), student engagement is a complex, multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social components. Behavioral engagement includes participation in classroom activities and extracurricular pursuits, emotional engagement involves feelings of belonging and interest, cognitive engagement relates to the investment in learning strategies and critical thinking, and social engagement reflects interactions with peers and educators (Fredricks, 2011; Martin et al., 2014).

Research consistently links high levels of student engagement to improved academic outcomes, such as higher grades, persistence, and graduation rates (Wang & Eccles, 2012; Reeve et al., 2019). Beyond academic achievement, engagement supports emotional health by fostering a sense of purpose, belonging, and self-efficacy (Williams, 2003). Conversely, disengagement is associated with absenteeism, dropouts, and psychological distress (Arlinkasari & Akmal, 2017). These findings underscore the critical role of engagement in both academic and psychological domains.

The school environment also exerts a powerful influence on students' psychological well-being. A positive school climate characterized by safety, supportive teacher-student relationships, clear expectations, and inclusivity promotes emotional resilience and motivation (Huseyin & Gönül, 2020; Tenekeci & Uzunboylu, 2020; Wang & Degol, 2016). Environments that foster connectedness and provide adequate resources can buffer the negative effects of stress and create a foundation for student thriving (Slack & Priestley, 2023; Schnell et al., 2025). In contrast, negative environments marked by bullying, neglect, or poor facilities can exacerbate stress and impede teaching effectiveness (Thapa et al., 2013).

At Injibara College of Teacher Education, students face unique academic and professional pressures as they balance rigorous coursework with practical teaching responsibilities. This dual demand increases their susceptibility to emotional challenges, highlighting the need for a supportive school climate and active engagement to safeguard psychological well-being.

Social skills, the interpersonal abilities that enable effective communication, empathy, collaboration, and conflict resolution, are vital in this equation (Goleman, 1995). These skills significantly enhance students' capacity to form meaningful relationships, access social support, and navigate complex social situations in academic settings (Bakx et al., 2006). Moreover, emotional intelligence, closely linked to social skills, has been associated with better stress management, higher academic achievement, and enhanced life satisfaction (Brackett et al., 2012). Social skills also foster emotional resilience by equipping students with tools to cope with challenges, regulate emotions, and build supportive networks (Rivers et al., 2013). Such resilience is particularly important for student teachers, who encounter not only academic demands but also the stressors associated with professional preparation and classroom management (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Despite the clear connections among student engagement, school environment, social skills, and psychological well-being, few studies have explored the mediating role of social skills in linking engagement and environment to psychological outcomes, particularly in Ethiopian higher education contexts. Understanding this mechanism is

critical for informing targeted interventions aimed at strengthening social competencies to enhance psychological health and academic success.

1.1. Conceptual background

Despite the growing recognition of psychological well-being as a critical component of educational success, there remains a significant gap in understanding how student engagement and social skill development interconnect to impact the mental health of college students in Ethiopia. This gap is particularly evident in teacher education institutions such as Injibara College of Teacher Education, where socio-cultural and institutional challenges are frequently overlooked in existing literature.

The school environment plays a crucial role in shaping student engagement. A positive school climate, characterized by safety, support, and adequate resources, significantly influences students' motivation and commitment. At Injibara College, the physical and emotional aspects of the school environment are vital. Classroom conditions, such as cleanliness, organization, and accessibility, directly impact students' ability to focus and engage in their learning. Additionally, the availability of learning materials, including textbooks and technological resources, can either facilitate or hinder the learning process. When students feel supported by their institution, they are more likely to take risks in their learning, ask questions, and participate actively in discussions. Moreover, the emotional climate of the school, including relationships with teachers and peers, is equally important (Kaur et al., 2022).

A nurturing environment where students feel valued and respected promotes a sense of belonging, which is essential for psychological well-being. Conversely, a negative school climate can lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and disengagement. The unique socio-cultural context of Ethiopia further complicates this dynamic, as cultural expectations and social norms can influence how students perceive and interact within their educational settings. Understanding these cultural nuances is crucial for creating an inclusive and supportive school environment (Cooley & Yovanoff, 2011; Riggio et al., 1990).

Student engagement, defined as active participation in learning, is crucial for enhancing psychological well-being. Engaged students often experience improved academic performance, greater social integration, and reduced emotional distress. However, many students at Injibara College face obstacles such as academic overload, financial pressures, and cultural expectations, which can lead to emotional exhaustion and disengagement. This disengagement is a significant predictor of burnout and depressive symptoms among college populations, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to student disconnection (Carmeli and Spreitzer, 2009).

The mediating role of social skills adds another layer of complexity to this issue. Skills such as communication, empathy, conflict resolution, and relationship building are essential for emotional regulation and peer support. Students with well-developed social skills are better equipped to navigate interpersonal challenges, maintain relationships, and engage in collaborative activities. This correlates with higher levels of academic success and lower instances of anxiety and depression. However, the lack of emphasis on social skill development within the educational framework at Injibara College may hinder students' ability to cope with stressors, ultimately impacting their psychological well-being (Abebaw and Gebrekidan, 2021).

1.2. Purpose of study

Addressing the interconnected issues of student engagement, school environment, psychological well-being, and the mediating role of social skills is vital for fostering a more supportive educational experience. The current gap in understanding these relationships highlights the need for targeted interventions and support systems tailored to the specific context of Ethiopian teacher education colleges. The research questions are as follows:

1. Is there a difference in gender student engagement, school environment, and psychological well-being among students at Injibara College?

2.   Is there a relationship between student engagement, school environment, and psychological well-being among students at Injibara College?

3.   How do student engagement and the school environment at Injibara College of Teacher Education influence students' psychological well-being?

4.   In what ways do social skill developments mediate student engagement, school environment, and psychological well-being among students at Injibara College?

2.   MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Research design

A cross-sectional quantitative study was conducted involving late adolescents and early adults selected from Injibara College of Teachers Education.

2.2. Participants

The research was conducted at Injibara College of Teachers Education, located in the southwestern part of the Amhara Regional State in Ethiopia. This college is approximately 447 km from Addis Ababa, the capital city, and 118 km from Bahir Dar, the capital of the Amhara Region. Injibara is positioned at a latitude of 10°59'N and a longitude of 36°55'E, with altitudes ranging from 2,540 to 3,000 meters above sea level. The local population primarily consists of the Awi ethnic group, which features various dialects and is a subgroup of the Agew people, known for their historical significance dating back to the Zagwe Dynasty. The predominant languages spoken in the area are Awgni and Amharic. The main religion practiced in the region is Orthodox Christianity, followed by Islam and Protestantism.

The study participants included Injibara College students from the Injibara sub-city enrolled in regular programs during the 2025 academic year. The group comprised first-year, second-year, and third-year student teachers, totaling 850 pupils, with a gender distribution of 47% male and 53% female.

Sample size determination techniques were utilized to establish the appropriate sample size. A multistage sampling method was adopted, beginning with purposive sampling to select Injibara College of Teacher Education. Stratified sampling was then applied to choose specific departments, followed by simple random sampling to select the respondents.

2.3. Data collection instruments

The study collected data using a questionnaire. It consisted of the following:

- **Student Engagement**: This variable was measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for Students (Schaufeli et al., 2002). The scale includes nine items and has a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = .91$. It assesses three dimensions: vigor ($\alpha = .79$), dedication ($\alpha = .85$), and absorption ($\alpha = .76$).

- **School Environment**: The School Environment Scale (SES), based on the framework developed by Rudolf Moos, was used to measure the social-psychological aspects of the school environment. This scale assesses three dimensions: relationships, personal development, and system maintenance.

- **Psychological Well-Being**: The Psychological Well-Being Scale (Díaz et al., 2006) was adapted for this study to evaluate the psychological well-being of students. This scale consists of sixteen items that focus on key aspects such as autonomy, self-acceptance, and positive relationships.

- **Measurement of Social Skills**: A self-administered questionnaire was used for data collection, consisting of sections on demographics and social skill development based on the work of Del Prette (2001). The range of scores for grit was from 1 to 5, corresponding to a Likert scale.

2.4. Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from Injibara College of Teacher Education (ICTERU, 132/25), and written and verbal consent were obtained from the participants.

3. RESULTS

The gender distribution and academic year for the time the data was collected are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Gender distribution and academic year

Gender	No	%
Male	107	40
Female	165	60
Academic Year		
First year	82	30
Second year	74	27
Third year	117	43

3.1. Independent T-Test results

An independent sample test revealed significant gender differences in student engagement, school environment perceptions, and psychological well-being. Male students had higher engagement scores (M = 61.11, SD = 5.04) than females (M = 56.99, SD = 5.99) and perceived their school environment more positively (M = 65.28, SD = 2.00 vs. M = 60.00, SD = 1.90). Conversely, female students reported better psychological well-being (M = 67.64, SD = 2.31) compared to males (M = 58.63, SD = 1.65). The results are seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Independent t-test results

Variable	Gender	Mean	SD	t	df	p-value
Student Engagement	Male	61.11	5.04	5.97	270	<0.001
	Female	56.99	5.99			
School Environment	Male	65.28	2.00	5.90	270	<0.001
	Female	60.00	1.90			
Psychological Well-Being	Male	58.63	1.65	10.51	270	<0.001
	Female	67.64	2.31			

3.2. Correlation analysis

A correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships among student engagement, school environment, and psychological well-being. Engagement correlated with the school environment (r = .267**, p < 0.01) and well-being (r = .335**, p < 0.01). The strongest correlation was between the school environment and well-being (r = .706**, p < 0.01). The results are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3
Correlation analysis results

Variable	Student Engagement	School Environment	Psychological Well-Being
Student Engagement	1	.267**	.335**
School Environment	.267**	1	.706**
Psychological Well-Being	.335**	.706**	1

3.3. Multiple regression analysis

The multiple regression analysis shows a strong positive correlation (R = 0.722) between student engagement and school environment with psychological well-being. The model explains 52.1% of the variance (R-squared = 0.521) and is statistically significant (F(2, 269) = 146.435, p < 0.001). The results are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4
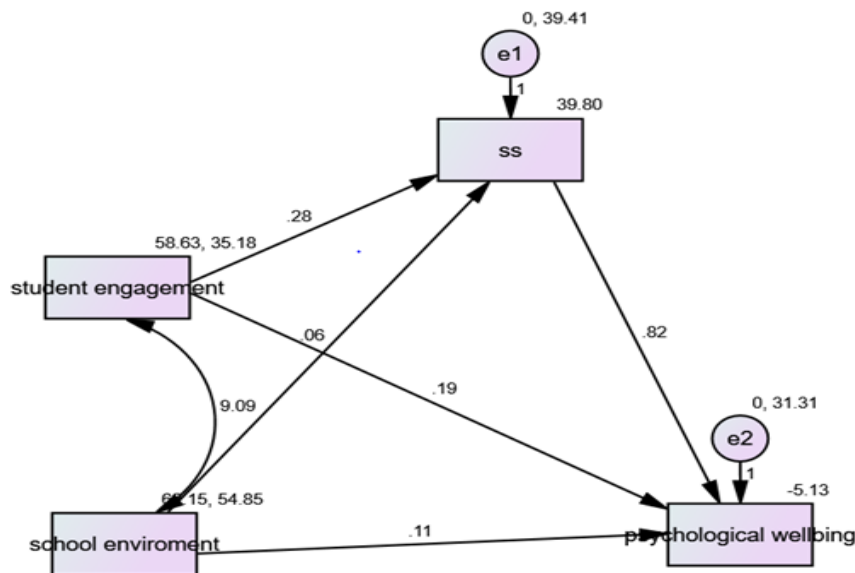*Multiple regression analysis*

Model Summary	R	R²	Adjusted R²	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	df1	df2	p-value
	0.722	0.521	0.518	5.68505	146.435	2	269	<0.001

3.4. Path analysis results

Figure 1
Path analysis results

The study utilized Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to validate a mediation model that explores the relationships among the school environment, student engagement, social skills, and psychological well-being (Figure 1). The results indicate the following effects (Table 5):

Table 5
SEM results

Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	Remarks
Student Engagement → Psychological Well-Being	0.19	0.23	0.42	Fully mediating
School Environment → Psychological Well-Being	0.11	0.05	0.16	Fully mediating
Student Engagement → Social Skills	0.28	0.00	0.28	Fully mediating
Social Skills → Psychological Well-Being	0.82	0.00	0.82	Fully mediating

3.5. Model fit indices

The analysis of the model fit indices indicates that the default path analysis model has an excellent fit to the data. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6
Model fit indices

Fit Index	Value	Threshold/Recommended	Conclusion
CMIN/DF	0.00	< 3 (good fit)	Excellent fit
CFI/TLI	1.00	> 0.90 (good fit)	Excellent fit
NFI	1.00	> 0.90 (good fit)	Excellent fit
IFI	1.00	> 0.90 (good fit)	Excellent fit
RMSEA	0.38	< 0.08 (good fit)	Poor fit
PCLOSE	0.00	> 0.05 (good fit)	Poor fit
AIC	28.00	Lower values indicate a better fit	Excellent fit
HOELTER	272	> 200 (good fit)	Good fit

4. DISCUSSION

The study revealed a significant contribution of student engagement and the school environment to the variance in psychological well-being among college student teachers. This key finding underscores the importance of targeting future interventions to foster student development and improve educational outcomes. Although the research was conducted at Injibara College of Teacher Education in the Amhara region, its implications apply to northern Ethiopia specifically and other regions within the country more broadly. The results provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers to design effective psychological interventions aimed at enhancing the well-being of this student population.

My analysis identified notable gender differences in student engagement, with male students exhibiting a mean engagement score of 61.11 (SD = 5.04), compared to female students' mean score of 56.99 (SD = 5.99). This difference was statistically significant, $t(270) = 5.97$, $p < .05$, indicating that male students demonstrate significantly higher engagement levels. These findings align with existing literature, including Smith et al. (2020), who noted that male students often show greater engagement in secondary schools, and Johnson et al. (2001), whose meta-analysis across multiple countries confirmed that boys generally exhibit higher behavioral and emotional engagement.

In the Ethiopian context, Tewachew & Abebe (2024) also reported that male secondary school students showed significantly higher engagement levels than females. These gender disparities emphasize the need for further investigation into contributing factors, such as socialization processes and gender-based expectations, which likely influence these differences.

The analysis further explored gender differences in perceptions of the school environment, revealing that male students had a higher mean score (M = 65.28, SD = 2.00) compared to female students (M = 60.00, SD = 1.90). This difference was statistically significant, t(270) = 5.90, p < .05, suggesting that male students viewed the school environment more positively. This finding is consistent with prior research, including Lee and Kim (2019), who reported that male students rated aspects like safety and teacher support more favorably. A cross-cultural study by Xiao and Wang (2021) also found that male students generally held a more positive view of their school environment.

In the Ethiopian context, Negash and Nega (2018) found that male students perceived safety and peer relationships more positively than their female counterparts. This supports the notion that gender-based differences in perceptions of the school environment are prevalent. Regarding psychological well-being, our analysis found that female students had a mean score of 67.64 (SD = 2.31), while male students scored 58.63 (SD = 1.65). This difference was statistically significant, t(270) = 5.97, p < .05, indicating that female students possess significantly higher psychological well-being. This aligns with global trends noted by Patel et al. (2018), who reported that adolescent girls generally express higher levels of subjective well-being. Erikson and Ranning (2017) emphasized the role of sociocultural factors in these disparities.

Conversely, some studies in Ethiopia found that male students reported higher levels of subjective well-being than females. This highlights the complexity of gender differences in psychological well-being and suggests the need for further exploration of how engagement and school environment interact with well-being across genders.

This study employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to explore the connections between the school environment, student engagement, social skills, and psychological well-being. Key findings indicate that student engagement directly affects psychological well-being (0.19) and has an indirect effect of 0.23 through social skills, leading to a total effect of 0.42. The school environment positively influences psychological well-being (direct effect of 0.11) and social skills (total effect of 0.16). Notably, social skills have a strong direct effect on psychological well-being (0.82), highlighting their crucial mediating role. The model shows a strong fit with a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of 0.98, despite a higher Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of 0.39. These results suggest that schools should implement strategies like Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs to enhance engagement and social skills, thereby fostering a supportive environment that promotes mental health and overall student success. These findings underscore the importance of understanding the interplay between gender, student engagement, school environment, and psychological well-being, with social skills serving as a critical mediating factor. The results highlight how social skills enhance the relationship between student engagement and psychological well-being, emphasizing their role in fostering positive interactions within the school environment. Further research is essential to develop targeted interventions that enhance educational experiences and outcomes for all students

5. CONCLUSION

The study at Injibara College has several strengths that enhance its value. Firstly, it focuses on the unique context of Injibara College, offering deep insights into the environmental and psychological factors affecting its students. This targeted approach provides a better understanding of their specific challenges and experiences. Secondly, the findings significantly contribute to the literature on student psychological well-being and engagement, particularly in under-researched areas. By addressing critical issues related to mental health and student engagement, the study enriches the discourse in public health and educational psychology. Additionally,

despite its limitations, the research establishes a solid foundation for future studies, encouraging exploration of these themes in broader contexts or through different methodologies, such as longitudinal studies.

However, the study has several limitations. One major limitation is the focus on students from Injibara College, which restricts the applicability of the findings to other educational settings. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported measures may introduce bias, as participants might inaccurately reflect their thoughts or feelings. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to determine causal relationships, a significant drawback. Finally, key demographic factors, such as socioeconomic status, were not considered, which could have provided a more nuanced understanding of the results. Overall, while the study offers valuable insights, these limitations should be taken into account when interpreting its findings.

The study at Injibara College reveals significant gender disparities in school climate, psychological health, and student engagement. Female students showed higher psychological well-being, while male students excelled in engagement and school atmosphere. A positive correlation exists between psychological well-being, school environment, and student participation, indicating that greater engagement enhances overall well-being. Social skills play a crucial mediating role in this relationship, highlighting their importance in fostering positive interactions.

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